

God on the steppe:
Christian missionaries in Mongolia after 1990

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Foreword

Working on this thesis has been a rewarding and inspirational journey and I owe a big part of it to the people who have helped me on the way.

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Note on transliteration

For transliteration of historical names and terms I follow Christopher Atwood's *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*. Contemporary Mongolian words are transliterated from Cyrillic according to the scheme proposed by Rita Kullman and Dandii-Yamadyn Tserenpil in *Mongolian Grammar*, published under the auspices of the School of Mongolian Language and Culture at the National University of Mongolia and Institute of Language and Literature, Academy of Sciences, Mongolia. Kullman and Tserenpil believe this method keeps the pronunciation as close to Cyrillic as possible.

Contents

Foreword.....	3
Note on transliteration.....	4
Contents.....	5
Introduction.....	7
Research Methods.....	9
Outline of chapters.....	12
Socio-economical situation in Mongolia after 1990.....	12
Chapter 1	
History of religions in Mongolia before 1990.....	18
The pre-imperial period.....	18
The Mongol Empire period.....	19
Christianity in the Mongol Empire.....	22
The post-imperial period.....	24
Christian mission in the post-imperial period.....	27
The Mongolian People's Republic period	30
Chapter 2	
Modernization and religious change in Mongolia.....	33
The classical theories of modernization and Christian mission.....	34
Multiple modernities.....	35
The West, the East and the new Mongolian identity.....	36
Multiple modernities and religion.....	38
Is there such a thing as a common communist context?.....	39
The dimensions of secularization.....	40
Secularization or revitalization?.....	43
Concluding remarks.....	45
Chapter 3	
Religious scene in Mongolia after 1990.....	46
Legal context – the legislated freedom of religion.....	46
Religious revival.....	53
Buddhism.....	53
Shamanism.....	60
Concluding remarks.....	62
Chapter 4	
Christianity in Mongolia after 1990.....	64
Evangelical Protestants.....	65
The beginnings	65
South Korean missionaries.....	69
Denominations.....	70
Churches, education and national leadership training.....	73
Christian community.....	76
Media	78
Humanitarian work.....	80
The Roman Catholic Church.....	83
The Jesus Christ Church of Latter-Day Saints.....	86

The Seventh-day Adventist Church	88
The Russian Orthodox Church.....	90
Concluding remarks.....	91
Chapter 5	
Contextualization of Christianity in Mongolia.....	92
The analytical usefulness of the concept of ‘syncretism’	93
Missionaries and contextualization – a historical perspective.....	95
Traditional religio-political relations and present-day contextualization of Christianity in Mongolia	98
The missionary understanding of syncretism and the issues of power and agency in the Mongolian context.....	101
Translation of Christian terminology and the Bible into Mongolian.....	108
Concluding remarks.....	113
Conclusion.....	114
Bibliography:.....	116
Internet sources.....	123
Miscellaneous.....	125
Interviews.....	125
Abstract.....	128

Introduction

This study seeks to tell the story of the growth and development of Christianity in Mongolia after the end of communism. It was inspired by the lack of Western academic literature on the topic. Some research has been conducted on the revival of Buddhism, folk religiosity and the cult of Chinggis Khan, but contemporary Christianity in Mongolia seems like a neglected topic, taken up only by missionaries themselves.

Mongolia is a vast landlocked country in Central Asia, surrounded by Russia from the north and China from east, south and west. It is one of the world's biggest countries, and at the same time with fewer than three million inhabitants, the most sparsely populated independent country in the world. The geographical position has determined the harsh continental climate (Ulaanbaatar is the world's coldest capital), and thus formed the lifestyle of pastoral nomadism and hunting. In pre-modern Mongolia adaptation to the steppe environment required the entire population to move on seasonal migrations. The nomads had no permanent settlements, no fixed houses, and their migration routes were for the most part unchanging. The Mongols accordingly adapted their culture to regular and seasonal changes of environment. The special position in the heart of Asia meant that the nomads served as a kind of connectors – linking distant societies and peoples, something that has also often been the deciding factor in politics, which since have tended to be the net result of the two powerful neighbors' interests.

The nomadic tribes have inhabited the Central Asian steppes for thousands of years, and the first Mongol state, the Hun state, was established already in the third century BCE on the present day territory of Mongolia. It was not until Chinggis Khan's conquests, however, that they became known to Europeans, but when they did, the impact was tremendous. The Mongol Empire of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was the largest continuous land empire that has so far existed. It included most of continental Asia, except for India and the south-east of the continent, as well as parts of Eastern Europe (Morgan, 1986: 5). After the fall of the Empire, Mongols returned to their pastures politically disintegrated and resumed their habit of internecine strives and tribal wars. Eventually, fragmented and weak, in the seventeenth century they had to submit to Manchu rule that lasted until 1911. Immediately after the collapse of the Qing dynasty, Outer Mongolia, with Russian support, claimed independence, but it was not recognized until 1921. In 1924 the Mongolian People's Republic was proclaimed. For the most part of twentieth

century Mongolia was under Soviet control, a so-called Soviet satellite. With glasnost and perestroika in Russia, Mongolians saw their opportunity, and after a series of peaceful demonstrations, the communist government stepped down and agreed to allow multi-party election. In 1992 Mongolia adopted a Constitution which granted freedom of religion.

Big changes followed, and the country entered a period of cultural, social and economic turbulence. The removal of limitations on religious practice has encouraged extensive religious revival. However, in the contemporary world religious ideas and practices travel fast, previously distant realities interact, beliefs are being re-accommodated and revalidated every day, competition between religions is sometimes fierce and choices are many. The new freedom of religion in Mongolia meant not only the freedom to openly practice the religion of their ancestors, but also the freedom to choose religion from the infinite pool of options in the modern pluralist religious market. Already in 1990, different faiths, religious organizations, churches and denominations began to penetrate Mongolia in order to seek new converts. Among them, the most prominent were the Christian missionaries.

Christianity was established as a missionary religion already in Matthew's Gospel, which ends with the appearance of Jesus to the disciples in Galilee and with his clear command to evangelize: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19).¹ The Apostles are meant to become "fishers of men", fishing people for Christianity (see: Matt. 4:19, Mark 1:17, Luke 5:2). Moreover, as David Bosch noted, this dimension of Christianity lies at its very core and is not optional (Bosch, 1991: 9), or in the words of the Second Vatican Council: ... "the pilgrim church is missionary by her very nature."² And Gerardus van der Leeuw pointed out, that when the missionary expansion is understood as the essential activity, its influence becomes a fully conscious propaganda of doctrine and worship (van der Leeuw, 2005: 101).

The idea of a country with no native Christians, no missionaries³ and no churches quickly awakened the missionary imagination,⁴ and Christian organizations began to arrive in Mongolia shortly after the collapse of communism. Foreign missionary groups including Roman Catholics,

1 All Bible quotes are taken from the *Authorized King James Version*.

2 Ad Gentes, chapter I: 2. All documents from the Second Vatican Council are available online at www.vatican.va, as accessed 25.04.2009.

3 There were many Russians in Mongolia before 1990, but the Russian Orthodox Church did not have any organized missionary activity in Mongolia during the socialist period and until 1998.

4 For maps, statistics and assessments of the "unreached peoples of the world" see www.joshuaproject.net, as accessed 15.04.2009.

Lutherans, Presbyterians, Seventh-day Adventists, various evangelical Protestant groups, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah's Witnesses quickly established their presence in Ulaanbaatar. The expatriate Christians of the early 1990s were keen to evangelize Mongolia as quickly and effectively as possible (Kemp, 2000: 506). And they seem to have been rather successful. In its annual survey of International Religious Freedom, the U.S. State Department suggested that the Mongolian Christian population may run as high as four percent of the whole, which means over one 100,000 people.⁵

Research Methods

During spring 2009 I spent a month in Ulaanbaatar. During this time I conducted semi-structured interviews with about thirty foreign missionaries and faith-based NGO employees, and six Mongolian pastors. I also spoke in a more informal way to a number of Mongolian Christians and Christian sympathizers in all age groups and with differing levels of religious commitment, from teenagers, who like to spend their free time with friends in church, to highly educated professionals, who had converted in the early nineties. I visited faith-based NGOs, Christian bookshops, a Christian radio station, children's home and churches of different denominations, observed worship meetings and Sunday services, as well as listened to Bible study classes and informational lectures. In order to gain a more comprehensive picture of how non-Christians conceived Christian missionary activities, I also met with a number of Buddhist and non-religious or undecided people. I interviewed two Mongolian Buddhist monks and one Australian, as well as several employees of Buddhist organizations and regular believers. I visited monasteries and temples, observed people worshipping and listened to lectures about Buddhism. I also studied written materials, brochures and DVDs given to me by the different Christian and Buddhist organizations, as well as information available online.

I chose Ulaanbaatar for my research because one of my main interests is the effect of modernization and urbanization on religious institutions, beliefs and practice. Furthermore, all the churches, organizations and missionaries have headquarters there and almost half of the population of Mongolia lives in the capital city. Therefore, while I recognize the importance of nomadic culture in Mongolia, this is largely an urban study. At the same time it needs to be

5 U.S. Department of State (2010) Mongolia, available at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148885.htm>, as accessed 10.02.2011. The estimates of the number of Christians in Mongolia vary widely. During my fieldwork in 2009 the churches' own calculations were more modest, with estimates of about 40-60,000 Christians. Mongolian leaders also admit that the growth has slowed down significantly. Pastor Dashdendev even suggested that the number of Christians has begun to decrease (interview, 29.05.2009).

remembered that traits of centuries of pastoral life are deeply ingrained in the Mongolian city and visible in interpersonal relations, work ethics, the upbringing of children and perceptions of time and space (Bruun and Narangoa, 2006: 7).

In order to understand religious faith and practice it is necessary not to look at 'religion' as a static entity with fixed and rigid characteristics, but as an ever changing dynamic system in a perpetual motion. As missionaries introduce religious ideas to new territories and induce interactions between societies and religions foreign to each other, they act as catalysts for change and fusion. The red thread going through this study is the idea that in all movements of religious conversion and change, there is interplay of the specific context, external influences and local adaptations. On the one hand, I am interested in how the functions, meanings and forms of religious beliefs, expressions and practice are transformed and renegotiated as social circumstances change with modernity. On the other hand, I am concerned with the dynamics of localization of religions, in this case the methods and strategies used by missionaries and practitioners, the politics of syncretism and the changes religious institutions, beliefs and practices undergo in a rapidly changing society where a plurality of religious actors attempt to advocate their religious conviction. My study focuses on how Christian missionaries maneuver the Mongolian landscape and how the people who convert to Christianity create their new Christian Mongolian identity.

In writing this thesis I have had two primary concerns: to present Christianity in Mongolia and to provide a framework for understanding it. The methodological approach adopted here excludes some other approaches to the subject. For instance, even though the crucial historical events in the development of Mongolian Christianity (both before and after 1990) are presented here, this study does not attempt to follow in detail the sequence of events: my main objective is to identify certain approaches, interactions and reactions rather than to give an overview of chronological developments. Moreover, even though the framework of the study is comprehensive, my purpose is not to provide an exhaustive account of all the dimensions of Christianity in Mongolia, but to focus on several areas of its development which I find particularly representative and which give insight into the larger picture. In addition, I am for the most part not concerned here with a discussion of pan-Mongolism and the current situation in Inner Mongolia and the Mongol Republics of the Russian Federation (Buryatia and Kalmykia). These are only mentioned with regard to past missionary efforts among Mongol people.

The existing literature on the topic of Christianity in Mongolia after 1990 is largely limited to personal accounts of missionaries about their life and work in Mongolia or studies written by members of the different Christian churches. Among them worth mentioning are: *Glory in Mongolia* (2006) by Rick Leatherwood, *A Light Shines in Central Asia: A Journey into the Tibetan Buddhist World* (2000) by Thomas Hale and *Steppe by Step: Mongolia's Christians – from Ancient Roots to Vibrant Young Church* (2000) by Hugh Kemp. All three have helped me see the growth of Christianity in Mongolia from the perspective of the missionaries. The latter was especially an eye opener to the importance of the Nestorian presence in the Mongol Empire in the creation of Mongolian Christian identity.

Recognizing the importance of conceptual precision and the existence of the many different definitions of the terms mission, evangelism and evangelization (Bosch, 1991: 409-411), and the many different ways to categorize the relationship between them, in order to avoid any ambiguity, I choose to use the terms as synonyms. I shall use them mostly interchangeably, while referring to the ideas and the process of translocation of religion and religious ideas, the activities surrounding it, as well as the theological background and reflections upon the motivations and the activities. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that Christianity is not the only missionary religion in Mongolia. Since this thesis does not deal with other religions' missionary efforts, and for the purpose of clarity and simplification, the terms missions and missionary relate to Christianity unless specified otherwise.

Conversion is another ambiguous concept, with several implied meanings, thus to simplify I am going to define the term as a change of religious affiliation. At the same time I recognize that the act of joining a church or sect is not necessarily the same as the internal process of conversion. It also needs to be mentioned that I employ the simplest definition of Christianity which includes all churches and denominations which base their existence on the belief in resurrected Christ, the Trinity of Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit and accept the Bible as the Word of God.

And finally, to avoid confusion, it needs to be underlined that Mongolians and Mongols are two different concepts, although they overlap to some extent. I distinguish between Mongolians – the citizens of the country of Mongolia, and Mongols, a larger group of people sharing common history and language. The majority of Mongols nowadays live outside of Mongolia – in China and the Russian Federation.

Outline of chapters

The thesis consists of five chapters. I believe that history holds the key to understanding the present. Therefore, the first chapter prepares for the following discussion by sketching history of religions in Mongolia and in particular the contacts with Christianity, until the year 1990. Chapter two offers a critical review of the concept of Western modernity and its associate, the theory of secularization. This largely theoretical chapter sets up the stage for the empirical analysis in the following chapters by situating the developments in contemporary Mongolia within global context.

The remaining chapters are organized around the issues that missionaries and Mongolians have indicated are central to understanding of contemporary Mongolia in general and Christianity in particular. Chapter three seeks to dissect and discuss the religious scene in Mongolia. First I investigate the laws implemented after 1990 which deal with religious matters and investigate how the missionaries maneuver the possibilities and limitations created by these laws. This chapter also presents selected issues surrounding the revival of pre-revolutionary religious forms and reflects on the relationship between Buddhists and Christians. Chapter four tries to shed light on the functioning and organization of Christianity in Mongolia. It also traces some of the strategies employed by the missionaries to attract converts. The final chapter examines certain aspects of contextualization of Christianity in contemporary Mongolia from the point of view of foreign missionaries and native believers.

Socio-economical situation in Mongolia after 1990

Already in late nineteenth and early twentieth century sociologists, including Weber and Durkheim, realized that religion and social change were related. Since then, and especially from the second half of the twentieth century, in the light of the evidence of changes in religious systems in connection to modernizing developments around the world, more dynamic ways of analyzing the relationship between social structure and religion have been developed.⁶ In Mongolia modernization, democratization, urbanization and globalization processes are affecting and changing the society and social arrangements, and religious beliefs and practices are not static during these transformations. Therefore, I think it is suitable to begin this study with a short presentation of the socio-economical situation in Mongolia after 1990.

⁶ See for example Bellah (ed.) (1965) and Juergensmeyer (1982).

For nearly seven decades Mongolia's entire political and economic system was under Soviet control. The country depended on subsidies from the Soviet Union of thirty percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and access to Russian and Eastern European markets for Mongolian products (due to Comecon agreements) (Odgaard, 1996: 103). The citizens enjoyed the material benefits of their Soviet-financed socialist society. In 1921, Mongolia lacked hospitals, banks, public schools and most people were illiterate. There were almost no buildings except for the monasteries. Russians brought twentieth century to the steppe. Schools, health care, transportation and communication infrastructures were established. Over time the literacy rate rose close to one hundred percent. When in January 1991 Soviet aid disappeared and Soviet advisers left the country, the result was devastating. Mongolians learnt that their newly regained freedom had a high economic price. The young democracy suffered a more serious peacetime economic collapse than any other nation during the twentieth century. In the first four years after abandoning the planned economy, the crop production was reduced by half and industrial output by one-third. GDP per capita also declined by one-third (Bruun and Odgaard, 1996: 23).

Daily life became increasingly difficult – social, health and education benefits were cut noticeably and poverty became a serious issue (Odgaard, 1996: 103). The government was forced to ration rice, sugar, tea, flour, and soap, among other commodities. In the meantime unemployment rose (Rossabi, 2005: 133) and public health deteriorated, particularly in the countryside. The virtual elimination of the previously free medical services and the imposition of fees left many with limited knowledge of and access to proper health care (ibid: 172).

Two decades later, despite efforts to reduce poverty, every third person in Mongolia is still living under minimum subsistence level (based on estimate of the income necessary to purchase a 2100 kilo-calorie diet). Many others are very close to the poverty line (Nyamtseren, 2007: 27). With a huge territory and a tiny population suffering from economic hardships, post-communist Mongolia is entirely dependent on broad international aid. Over the 1990s, official development assistance averaged around twenty-five percent of the GDP (ibid: 30). The general perception is that corruption has become a common method of operation.⁷

Mongolia began the twentieth century with a very rural population. In the 1920s only a few percent of Mongolians were living in towns. In the second half of the twentieth century, as a

⁷ It was repeatedly expressed to me during my fieldwork that in Mongolia one can solve everything with money and that corruption is a big issue.

result of Soviet backed industrialization, Mongolia experienced rapid urbanization. In 1990 close to sixty percent of population was living in towns (Gilberg and Svantesson, 1996: 20).

While Mongolia is one of very few countries where full nomadism is still upheld as a way of life (Humphrey and Sneath, 1999), with the majority of population living in urban areas, many Mongolians have become settled or semi-settled people (still living in a *ger*, i.e. the Mongolian tent, but in one location, on the fringes of the city) (Bruun, 2006: 162).

The pastoral lifestyle is still preferred by many, but for others, particularly the young, the city has a powerful draw. On the one hand, the nomadic traditions are seen as a repository of national identity and cultural heritage, and as such should be preserved, but on the other, rural immigrants come to the cities seeking opportunities to improve their living standard (Sneath, 2006: 156). As unemployment spread in the provincial centers, poverty and the high cost of living forced the residents to move back to the countryside (especially in the years 1990-1993) or to more populous urban areas (ibid: 153-154). Following the severe winter disasters (Mong. *zud*) in the years 1999-2002,⁸ many rural people lost their animals and were left without means to survive (Bruun, 2006: 162). As a result a high in-migration rate has been observed to the three biggest cities: Ulaanbaatar, Darkhan and Erdenet (Nyamtseren, 2007: 27).

The population growth imposed tremendous strains on the capital. In the 1920s Ulaanbaatar was just a small town of 2.3 sq. km with about 6,000 inhabitants living mostly in *gers*. Besides the temples and monasteries, it had a small power station and a printing house. In the early nineties, this large industrial city covered an area of 1,360 sq km (Gilberg and Svantesson, 1996: 21). From 1990 to 2000, the number of residents grew from about 555,000 to roughly 762,000. In the following decade the city reached one million inhabitants.⁹

There have been many winners and losers in the process. Ulaanbaatar is being quickly transformed. The number of private cars and businesses, as well as new construction, is rapidly increasing. At the same time, reports show that every second adult in Mongolia consumes too much alcohol. The alcohol industry in Mongolia has enjoyed unparalleled growth in the last decades as consumption has increased enormously. Unemployment and poverty are the main, although not the only, reasons for the excessive drinking. Many politicians have a direct interest in the alcohol industry, and several rely on alcohol production and sale as their primary source of

⁸ The winter 2009-2010 was also a *zud* winter, resulting in death of millions of animals

⁹ Some estimates suggest that by 2030 population of Ulaanbaatar may reach over 1.8 million (e.g. see <http://www.mad-mongolia.com/news/mongolia-news/ulaanbaatar-population-to-reach-1-870-million-by-2030-5857/>, as accessed 01.06.2011).

income. In addition, a large portion (almost twenty-five percent) of the state's operating budget comes from the tax on alcohol (Armstrong and Tsogtbaatar, 2010: 212). Thus the government long hesitated to launch campaigns against alcohol abuse. As a consequence, in Mongolia there are more stores licensed to sell alcohol per person, than in any other country in the world (ibid: 210). Most supermarkets have an aisle dedicated to vodka and one can buy a half-liter bottle for slightly less than two US dollars (ibid: 215).

Another major social issue is domestic violence, which affects a third of Mongolian women. Unemployed males frequently turn to alcohol, which can easily translate into domestic abuse (ADB and WB, 2005: 43-44). AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are on the rise (Ginsburg, 1998: 67). The city also faces serious pollution and smog problems. Air pollution surpasses the safe level manifold. In fact, Ulaanbaatar is one of the cities with the worst air quality in the world. Especially in winter the visibility is seriously reduced, while the health consequences include high incidences of chronic bronchitis and cardiovascular diseases. Additionally, only half of the sewage water is properly purified and the city has too few garbage trucks to remove all the accumulated waste (Rossabi, 2005: 142).

Because the state does not have the resources to provide housing, many newcomers live in the *ger* districts¹⁰ (now home to more than sixty percent of the population of Ulaanbaatar) on the fringes of the city. In a typical scenario, a family from the rural area arrives in the outskirts of a city, finds a piece of land to set up the *ger* and builds a fence around it. The land belongs to the city, and the city administration tries to get them to move, but the family has nowhere to go. Finally, the city permits the family to stay where they are or moves them to another site, and provides all the necessary documents granting them a land lease (Sarlagtay, 2004: 333). The *ger* districts lack drainage system, sanitation facilities, central heating, running water and street lights. Children play in mounds of trash. But the inhabitants have a roof over their heads, which is more than can be said about the many homeless, living in the underground passages where the city's hot water pipes keep them reasonably warm in winter (Rossabi, 2005: 140-141).

These underground tunnels are also home to an unknown number of street children. Some of them are orphans, others neglected run-aways. They earn their way by selling small things, washing cars, and begging. Some engage in particularly hazardous activities, such as collecting coal from abandoned mines, stealing, and prostitution. The street children appeared in the early

¹⁰ *Ger* districts are the Mongolian equivalent of shantytowns. As the name suggests, most of the inhabitants live in the traditional Mongolian tents.

1990s and, despite efforts, are still a problem. The Mongolian government builds shelters and tries to take care of the children, but because of lack of resources often has to rely on foreign aid organizations (UNICEF, 2003). The representatives from the foreign led orphanages and shelters used to pick up children directly from the streets and underground tunnels, but it is not allowed anymore. Now the government is responsible for finding the children and placing them in public shelters, and the different organizations take them from there.¹¹

Under socialism women gradually achieved more opportunities in education and employment, and they benefited from the state-provided services. By 1989, seventy percent of doctors and teachers, about sixty-four percent of those in trade, and sixty-seven percent of those in banking, finance, and insurance were women. Women, even in the most remote areas, were guaranteed free health care, maternity leave and childcare facilities. The government provided assistance to widows, pensions to the elderly and care for the disabled (Rossabi, 2005: 151). The transition to market economy has had a disproportionately large effect on women as they lost jobs, position in the society, and the strong social support system. Kindergartens and maternity homes have closed or become very expensive and maternity and unemployment benefits have become drastically limited. At the same time health care deteriorated and maternal mortality increased (Odgaard, 1996: 134). To sustain themselves and their families, some girls and women living below the poverty line have turned to prostitution (Rossabi, 2005: 156).

Private companies are reluctant to hire young women (Benwell, 2006: 118) and the public sector wages are very low. In recent years women have experienced more difficulties in reaching top positions (Skapa and Benwell, 1996: 139). Also in politics women have generally lost ground. Quotas for female participation in the parliament have been discarded, resulting in an abrupt decline in the number of women in the legislature. The proportion of women elected to national parliament fell from twenty-three percent in 1990 to ten percent in 2000 to only seven percent in 2004. This trend is reflected at all levels of political decision making and women hold almost no major national positions (ADB and WB, 2005: x). With unemployment, alcoholism, crime, and domestic abuse all on the rise, the number of single women with children and female-headed households increased rapidly (ibid: 11).

Education had been one of the glories of the communist era. By 1990 nearly all children attended school for at least eight to ten years. The style of teaching was modeled on the Soviet

11 Interview with Father Wiktor, 19.05.2009.

system, and many Mongolians went to study in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe. In the 1990s the government was forced to reduce spending on education. The teachers' salary decreased significantly, and a reduced number of teachers resulted in larger class sizes (Rossabi, 2005: 161). The government removed subsidies for boarding schools and many herders, unable to pay the fees, were forced to pull their children out of school (Humphrey and Sneath, 1999: 207). Numerous private schools, colleges and institutes, were opened in 1990s. They had often poor supplies and equipment, poor teachers, they were unable to keep the expected educational standard, and just wanted to enroll as many students as possible (Rossabi, 2005: 163). Now there are too many university students and too few vocational and technical school students.¹²



Ulaanbaatar Gospel Church (usually referred to as UB-Church).
Built in 2005.

¹² Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009.

Chapter 1

History of religions in Mongolia before 1990

To appreciate the “now” it is essential to first look into the past. The processes taking place on the religious stage in contemporary Mongolia can only be thoroughly understood if seen through historical glasses. Therefore, this chapter shortly examines the history of religions in Mongolia. I study the general Mongol approaches towards religions over the centuries, including the politics, laws and beliefs – with special attention paid to contacts with Christianity. I focus on the way Mongols saw the world and reasons why they would choose one religion over another. Furthermore, this chapter investigates the previous Christian missionary efforts directed towards the Mongols. For the purpose of clarity I have divided Mongolian history before 1990 into four periods, namely the pre-imperial period, the Mongol Empire period, the post-imperial period, and the Soviet period.

The pre-imperial period

Mongolia, since prehistoric times, has been inhabited by nomads whose beliefs, deriving from reverence and respect of elders and of natural phenomena, developed into a form of ancestor-worship. The spirits of the ancestors were called upon and asked for help against the constant dangers brought about by the powers of nature (Natsagdorj, 2003: 191). The person invoking the supernatural powers, often the chieftain of the clan himself, acquired a special position of mediator, offering assistance against malevolent forces. The development of Mongolian pre-Buddhist beliefs appears, according to Walther Heissig, to be the derivative of the need for stability and protection of man and his property against threats (1980: 9). Their religion cherished the sky, sun and moon, stars and planets, water and earth deities, fire and hearth and the spirits of forefathers and ancestors. Offerings and sacrifices made to all of the above were directly related to the nomadic lifestyle of the Mongols (Natsagdorj, 2003: 191).

The special geographic position of Mongolia at the crossroads of Asia meant that the nomads were constantly in contact with different societies, with various cultural beliefs and practices, including different religious ideas. As a consequence many foreign influences acted, through their various peoples, upon Mongolian religiosity. The Huns from the second century BC had a wide political and economic relation with the countries where Buddhism was broadly

spread in Central Asia. Heissig estimates that the Mongols first came into contact with Buddhism in the early part of the fourth century CE (1980: 4).

Another foreign religion present in the region was Christianity of the Syriac-rite Church of the East, known as Nestorian, borne eastwards by Syrian traders. The Nestorian missionaries, after being nomadized in Central Asia, managed to win converts among some of the pre-Mongol tribes of the Central Asian steppe, namely the Naiman, Kereyid, Merkid, Tatar and Önggüd tribes, but Christianity was not finally accepted by the mass of the people (Jagchid, 1988: 87, Jackson, 2005: 45). The traditional vertical Mongol script derives from the Uighur script, which had been created for them by Syrian Nestorians and transmitted by Nestorian and Manichaean missions (Moffett, 1998: 401).

Even though the Syrian historians' records of the conversion of the Kereyid king to Christianity in the beginning of eleventh century might be incorrect, the Kereyids were known as a Christian Nestorian tribe, and the Christian names of the members of the ruling house prove it sufficiently (Jackson, 2005: 45). Toward the end of the twelfth century the Christian chief of the Kereyids, Toghril Ong Khan, became patron of the young Temüjin (ibid: 37), and through this relationship Chinggis had immediate contact with Nestorianism. Some scholars see the Ong Khan of the Kereyids as the most likely contender for the title of "Prester John" – a legendary Christian king of Asia, thought by Europeans to have ruled somewhere in Central Asia (Kemp, 2000: 53, Moffet, 1998: 401).

The Mongol Empire period

In the beginning of the thirteenth century CE, in the eve of Chinggis Khan's rise to power and creation of the great empire, the nomadic society on the steppes was accustomed to the presence of many religions. Buddhism was well known, Muslim merchants traveled through Mongol territory, many of the Uighur Turks were Manichaeans, and several of the tribes of Mongolia declared adherence to Nestorian Christianity (Morgan, 1986: 41).

The Mongols had traditionally been tolerant towards other religions (Jackson, 2005: 45). Perhaps the most comprehensive summary of religious attitudes of the khans has been given by 'Ala'ud-Din Ata-Malik Juvaini (1226-1283), one of the historians of the Mongols:

“[Chinggis Khan] being the adherent of no religion and the follower of no creed, he eschewed bigotry, and the preference of one faith to another, and the placing of some above others; rather he honoured and respected the learned and pious of every sect, recognizing such conduct as the way

to the Court of God. And as he viewed the Moslems with the eye of respect, so also did he hold the Christians and idolaters in high esteem. As for his children and grandchildren, several of them have chosen a religion according to their inclination, some adopting Islam, others embracing Christianity, others selecting idolatry and others again cleaving to the ancient canon of their fathers and forefathers and inclining in no direction, but these are now a minority. But though they have adopted some religion they still for the most part avoid all show of fanaticism and ... consider all sects as one and not to distinguish them from one another.” (Juvaini, 1997: 26)

Scholars have over time offered diverse explanations of Mongols’ firm policy of religious tolerance. For David Morgan the probable reasons were simply indifference and a feeling that any religion might be right, and that therefore it would be sensible to have every subject praying for the Khan; combined with the fact that the Mongols were accustomed to the presence of many religions on the steppes (1986: 41). This is a reasonable argument, if one realizes that their religion for the most part was concerned with the material needs of the present life. Heissig describes it as “a religion bound to specific goals, directed only to the past and the present. Ideas concerning the future [life] are foreign to it” (1980: 11). The other religions were to the Mongols nothing more than branches of their own beliefs. The new gods were just added to the existing pantheon – the more priests prayed for the Khan and the people, the better (Jagchid, 1988: 83). It may at least partially explain their willingness to consider the possibility of other religions being true. So Buddhism, Christianity and/or Islam were not necessarily seen by the Mongols, even if they accepted one of them, as excluding their own beliefs. The Mongols believed in getting as much heavenly protection as possible (Morgan, 1986: 44).

Chinggis Khan made use of this traditional philosophy and assembled nations in his empire with their religions intact, under the condition that the priests from the conquered nations would pray to their gods for the Mongol rulers. In return the clergy was exempted from taxation and military service (Atwood, 2004: 368). Religious affiliation was one’s own choice, the most important things were loyalty to the Khan and obedience to the law.

Although the Mongol religion had many gods and heavenly beings, it seems that one was more important than the others: the Eternal (Everlasting) Heaven – Möngke Tenggeri. It appears that the Mongols believed in a heavenly power to which everything on and above the earth was subjected (Heissig, 1980: 47). Möngke Tenggeri was the universal victory-granting sky god, who gave the divine right to Chinggis to conquer and rule the entire world. Claiming divine blessing or origin was a way to legitimize the power of the khans and to gain respect (Fletcher, 1986: 30-

32). The thirteenth century *Secret History of the Mongols* is filled with examples of veneration of Heaven. It repeatedly emphasizes that the victory of the khans was possible due to the help of Heaven. Mongol decrees customarily included the phrase: “by the power of Eternal Heaven”, while warnings to enemies said: “the results will only be known by Heaven” (Jagchid, 1988: 51). John of Plano Carpini, the first of the European missionaries to reach the Mongol court, wrote in his account about the Mongols’ beliefs: “they believe in one God, and they believe that He is the maker of all things visible, and invisible; and that it is He who is the giver of the good things of this world as well as the hardships” (Dawson, 1980: 9). This may serve as another reason for the Mongol tolerance - they respected other religions because they considered that their fundamental belief in Heaven was the same as the beliefs of other nations, and that they all prayed to the same power (Atwood, 2004: 368; Purev and Purvee, 2008: 97).

After the death of Chinggis Khan, the Mongol Empire split into a number of smaller khanates, each ruled by a descendent of Chinggis. By the middle of the thirteenth century the Mongols had built their enormous empire and found themselves closely interacting with many different religious traditions, which fought for influence and favor of the khans. During the reign of Möngke Khan (ruled 1251-1259), there were, according to the Franciscan monk William of Rubruck, one Christian church, two Muslim mosques, and twelve pagan [Buddhist] temples in the Mongol capital Qara-Qorum (present-day Kharhorin) (Dawson, 1980: 184). Rubruck commented on the delusions of the representatives of the different confessions present at Möngke Khan’s court: “He does not believe in any of them...; yet they all follow his court like flies honey, and he gives to them all and they all think they enjoy his special favour and they all prophesy good fortune for him” (ibid: 160).

As a result of interactions with other societies within the empire, some of the khans personally adopted one of the religions. However, whatever personal religious sympathies that the Mongol rulers might have had, never interfered with the task of governing the empire and conquering new territories (Atwood, 2004: 470; Jackson, 2005: 100). Qubilai Khan (ruled 1260-1294) made Tibetan Buddhism state religion, in order to utilize its idea of the universal, just monarch (Skt. Cakravartin) implying a unity of state and religion, but he still sustained the traditional religious tolerance in the empire (Baabar, 1999: 66).

The subject nations of the Mongol Empire¹³ appear to have experienced a period of relatively peaceful co-existence between Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism and of freedom for Islam and Christianity, and the Mongol attitude towards religion is perhaps best summed up by the behavior of the Il-Khan Öljeitü (ruled 1304-1316), “who had achieved the unusual distinction of belonging at one time or another to almost every currently available religion. Presumably a residual Shamanist, he had been a Buddhist as well as a baptized Christian, and he was later to oscillate between the Sunni and Shi’i forms of Islam” (Morgan, 1986: 161).

Christianity in the Mongol Empire

The Mongol Empire seems to have been a time of vitality and growth for Christianity in Central Asia and China. The Chinggisids (lineage of Chinggis Khan) greatly intensified cultural and commercial contacts throughout the continent. Products, ideas and people travelled freely in all directions and across ethnic, cultural and political borders. In order to be able to rule such a vast empire, the Mongol rulers were dependent on the services of educated officials, physicians and secretaries, some of them Christian (England, 2002: 78). Amongst the many Christians who were given prominent roles were administrators, ministers, tutors, generals and envoys. Christians from the West, like Marco Polo, also held such posts for extended periods (ibid: 82).

Furthermore some highly ranked women related to the various khans have been identified as Christians. Chinggis Khan, in order to strengthen his position as ruler and make alliances, had his sons marry the daughters of powerful tribal leaders (Moffett, 1998: 402), among which were Nestorian Christian Kereyid, Merkid and Naiman women. Chinggis’ son and successor, Ögedei Khan (ruled 1229-1241) had been positive towards Christianity thanks to his Merkid Nestorian wife Töregene, and his son Güyüg Khan (ruled 1246-1248) was even more so, because of his mother’s influence and the fact that his wife, Oghul-Qaimish, was also a Merkid Christian (Baabar, 1999: 41-42). Worth mentioning is also the Kereyid princess Sorqaqtani Beki, the Christian mother of Khans Möngke and Qubilai, praised by John of Plano Carpini and Rashid al-Din for her intelligence, integrity and administrative skills (Atwood, 2004: 512; England, 2002: 83). However, since she followed the tradition of tolerance, her sons grew up only as sympathizers of Christianity and none of them officially converted to it (Baabar, 1999: 45).

13 The Mongol Empire included most of continental Asia, except for India and the south-east of the continent, as well as parts of Eastern Europe.

At the height of Mongol power, when Islam began to conquer the once Christian Holy Land, in the one hundred years, from 1245-1346, several different Catholic missions were sent off on the long and difficult journey across Asia. The missionaries were recruited from the newly-founded Franciscan and Dominican orders. These first papal missions to Central Asia were as much political as religious, and the ambassadors were expected to achieve both spiritual and political goals. The intention was to find out more about the Mongols and to prevent further assaults on Europe and Christendom, as well as to preach Christianity and the Christian civilization (Moffett, 1998: 406-407). The legend of Prester John awoke also hope for some kind of alliance in order to defend the Holy Land.

The first envoy, the Franciscan John of Plano Carpini, arrived in the Mongol capital of Qara-Qorum in 1246 during the succession conclave, where the next great khan after the death of Ögedei was to be chosen. Since the Mongols were busy with conclave, he failed to achieve any diplomatic recognition (Moffett, 1998: 408-409; Wood, 2004: 117). About seven years later, in 1253, Rubruck, also a Franciscan friar, reached the court at Qara-Qorum. The Christian rulers of Europe were much encouraged by the stories of members of the Mongol ruling house converting to Christianity or having Christian sympathies; it was also rumored that the Mongols believed in one God (Jackson, 2005: 256). Rubruck was disappointed to discover that the Mongol court was not as full of Christians as it appeared from the report of Plano Carpini, and the Christians present there were actually the schismatic Nestorians (Moffett, 1998: 410; Wood, 2004: 117-118). He found this branch of Christianity spread widely through Asia, and mentioned four Central Asian tribes as Christian: the Uighurs in part, the Naimans, the Kereyids, and the Merkids. While his description of their Christianity is very critical, it should be remembered that to him they were heretics and his opinion was undoubtedly biased. Moreover, the Christianity of the steppes had surely been affected by syncretism¹⁴ with local beliefs and practices (Moffett, 1998: 411) – to Rubruck a sign of unacceptable a weakening of the “true” Christianity.

However biased, the record of Rubruck’s journey is the earliest description of the Central Asia’s peoples and religions to reach the West (Jackson, 2005: 261). Apart from information-gathering, Rubruck’s mission was unsuccessful. Möngke Khan expelled him from Qara-Qorum most probably for arrogance and demanding the Khan’s immediate conversion to Catholicism. The restrictive and exclusivist doctrine of Christianity assumed superiority over other religions

14 For a discussion of the analytical category ‘syncretism’, see chapter five.

and was perceived as a threat to Mongol traditional tolerance (Moses, 1977: 59). Yet another Franciscan, John of Montecorvino, made the journey along the Silk Road as far as Daidu (now Beijing), where he arrived in 1291. There he built the first Catholic Christian church in 1299. His stay in Daidu was filled with conflicts with Nestorians (Moffett, 1998: 457). The last missions to the Mongols court in Daidu were those of Odoric of Ponderone and John of Marignolli.

During the period of the empire Mongols had extensive contacts with the Russian Orthodox Church through the conquest of Russia. Khans conquering Russia respected the Mongol tradition of religious tolerance, thus they destroyed and burned down everything in their way, but tried to spare the churches. Even some privileges were granted. Some of the Mongols who remained in Russia accepted Orthodoxy and married Russians.¹⁵

The evidence of increasing (and incomprehensible for the Mongols) antagonism between Nestorian and Roman Catholic traditions, may be one of the reasons of lessened recognition by the khans and the later decline and finally disappearance of Christianity from Central Asia after the fourteenth century (England, 2002: 87, Moffett, 1998: 413). Sechin Jagchid suggests Christian doctrine sounded too exclusive and hostile to the ordinary Mongol, and perhaps Christian priests were simply seen as inferior in wisdom, personal ability and learning compared with famous Taoist or Tibetan monks. Consequently, the Christian priests isolated themselves and eventually vanished for several centuries (1988: 88). In China Christianity might have been resented by the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) as a foreign religion associated with the Mongols (through many intermarriages), so when the Ming pushed out the Mongols, they did the same with Nestorianism and Catholicism (Kemp, 2000: 225-226, Moffett, 1998: 474-475).

The post-imperial period

After the collapse of the Mongol Empire, Buddhism and Christianity practically disappeared among the Mongols, who returned to their pastures in Central Asia and their traditional beliefs.¹⁶ The Mongols entered an extended period of political disintegration and of internecine wars, which stretched until the end of the sixteenth century (Jerryson, 2007: 17).

In the second half of the sixteenth century the rivalry among the Mongol princes pushed some of them to search for new ways to legitimize their power. Tibetan Buddhism appealed to

¹⁵ Interview with Father Aleksey, 14.05.2009.

¹⁶ However, there exists evidence of sporadic contacts between the Mongols and Tibetan clergy (Atwood, 2004: 490) which would suggest that Buddhism did not totally disappear from the Mongol steppe.

them through its ideology of ‘Two Customs’ (Mong. *khoyar yosu*).¹⁷ According to this principle religion and state were dependent upon each other and Buddhism legitimized and sanctified the ruler of Mongolia as a universal ruler (going back to the idea of universal monarch, which Qubilai Khan tried to utilize two centuries earlier). With help from Tibetan monks, Buddhism spread quickly and soon achieved influence. The monasteries began to gather considerable wealth in land, animals, books, artifacts and other treasures, which made them a considerable economic power (Veit, 2009: 171-173).

At the end of the seventeenth century, the Manchus, anxious to secure their domination of China and Mongolia, had been quick to understand that with the help of Buddhism, their warlike northern neighbors could be divided and controlled; thus they eagerly encouraged the conversion of Mongolia. Therefore, they supported Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia through building monasteries and financial donations (Batbayar and Soni, 2007: 3; Baabar, 1999: 72). However, it should be mentioned that such one-sided view of the Qing’s role is questioned by some scholars. For example Johan Elverskog states that although Buddhism was employed by the Manchus in the formation of their empire, and therefore served partly as a tool of oppression, it also gradually became an essential factor defining Mongol identity (2006: 169-170).

Nevertheless, it was the ruling class who invited Tibetan Buddhist masters and facilitated the conversion. Heissig notes that a significant part of the Mongol conversion consisted of acts of government (1980: 29), and that the spread of Buddhism went hand in hand with prohibition of the traditional beliefs and practice, agreed upon among the aristocracy and stimulated by the third Dalai Lama (ibid: 27, 36). Learning Buddhist prayers and showing religious zeal became highly praised, while performing pre-Buddhist rites was to be fined and legally persecuted (Baabar, 1999: 69). Buddhism was for example promoted by promising a horse or a cow to whoever would learn certain texts by heart. The idols were to be replaced by the representations of the Buddha and Buddhist deities, such as the six-armed Mahakala. In place of the forbidden songs and hymns, magical formulae (*dharani*) and Buddhist prayers were taught and distributed among the people in numerous copies (Heissig, 1980: 36).

In the Buddhist missionary approach, syncretistic tendencies were observable from the outset. They consisted not of eliminating, but of assimilating certain religious practices and replacing the old rituals with new ones with the same function (Atwood, 1996: 115). Buddhist

17 Known as the ‘patron-priest’ (Tib. *yon mchod*) relationship in Tibet.

missionaries consciously introduced features of Buddhism that appeared to have similarities with the existing local religious practices, e.g. the ecstatic Tibetan state oracle along with tantric practices (Heissig, 1980: 39, 43). However, many native Mongolian deities were so important to the people that the authorities found it nearly impossible to force the nomads to abandon them (Baabar, 1999: 69). Therefore exclusively Mongolian deities had to be accepted into the Buddhist pantheon in order to legitimize their worship as Buddhist. For example the cult of Chinggis Khan was not destroyed, but incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon. Chinggis became identified as Vajrapani and the protector of Mongolia (Atwood, 2004: 452)

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Buddhism regulated most aspects of Mongolian society. Since the eighteenth century the religious language of the Mongols was Tibetan, even though the complete Tibetan Buddhist canon had already been translated into Mongolian, and part of Mongolian Buddhist scholarship on philosophy, art, medicine and other Buddhist subjects was written in Mongolian (Bareja-Starzyńska and Havnevik, 2006: 216). Buddhism had practically monopoly on literacy, thus the monks served not only as religious figures, but also as teachers, judges, artists, and doctors. The Sangha had become the most powerful economic and social institution in the country and it personified Mongolian culture. At this point it should be noted that the strict divide between the domain of sacred and secular, so characteristic of Western culture, did not exist in many non-Western societies, such as Mongolia or Tibet. Buddhism saturated every aspect of life in Mongolia, influencing areas that Westerners typically view as secular (Jerryson, 2007: 65).

The Manchus ruled Mongolia from a distance. The incarnate Jibzundamba Khuthugtus, starting with Zanabazar (seventeenth century), were the unquestionable and respected leaders of Buddhism, enjoying special powers and privileges. A monk's duty was to read scriptures and carry out religious work. He had no obligations to the state and paid no taxes. No Mongol would take an important step in life without consulting a monk or a reincarnation. Such high status for the clergy encouraged parents to send their sons to monasteries (Jagchid, 1988: 135). It was believed that the greater number of monks in the family, the greater was the merit of that family. Due to the celibacy requirement, this practice significantly impeded the productivity and population growth in Mongolia. It also put a big pressure on the families, left with very few hands able to work (Larson, 1930: 81-82). It has been suggested, however, that the growth of monasticism might have been a reaction to the harsh economic situation, and not the reason for it

(Atwood, 2004: 453). After finishing studies in the monastery, some monks would return to their relatives and live with them. They would take part in herding and other work, as well as take care of religious matters in the family, only to return to their monastery for a few weeks each year. Furthermore, not all monks observed the celibacy rule and some got married (Larson, 1930: 95).

When the Manchu empire collapsed in 1911, the Mongols attempted to gain freedom from China. In December 1911 Outer Mongolia officially proclaimed independence. The eighth Jibzundamba Khutugtu (1870-1924) was crowned as a head of church and state, and thus Mongolia entered a short period of theocratic rule. However, both Russia and China wanted to control Mongolia. The steppe country became a battlefield and the Mongols silent spectators as the two giants surrounding them fought for control (Baabar, 1999: 154, Natsagdorj, 2003: 29). Eventually the Soviet Union won. In 1924 the eighth Jibzundamba died, and the Soviets opposed the election of the new reincarnation (Bareja-Starzynska and Havnevik, 2006: 217). Mongolia was proclaimed a people's republic in July 1924.

Christian mission in the post-imperial period

From a Western missionary's point of view Outer Mongolia was rather inaccessible in the past. It is distant from the sea, and a railway line was only constructed in the twentieth century. The sparse population and the vast distances between settlements, together with the tough continental climate might have been reasons why so few Christian proselytizers worked in the Mongol heartland. It also seems the missionaries who decided to come to Mongolia met with spiritual resistance and indifference to the message. Patrick Taveirne notes also difficulties with obtaining permits from the Qing to proselytize, harassment of the converts by the local authorities and lack of financial resources (2004: 256).

There is no record of a Catholic mission to China and Mongolia after the fall of the Mongol Empire, before the Jesuits established a mission in China in the second half of the sixteenth century. Although they had no distinct mission to Mongolia, some contacts might have been made. After the Jesuit mission was suppressed by the Vatican and had to close in 1773, China was assigned to the Lazarists (The Congregation of the Mission, CM) (Tiedemann, 2009: 14), who had showed enough interest in Mongol lands for Pope Gregory XVI to designate the Apostolic Vicariate of Liaotung (i.e. Mongolia and Manchuria) in 1838, and then to create a separate Apostolic Vicariate of Mongolia in 1840, encompassing all the territories inhabited by Mongol people within the Manchu Empire. Before that Mongol lands were under the Catholic

Diocese of Beijing. The missionaries' activities concentrated on the Chinese population of Inner Mongolia, and all the Christian communities were Chinese. Work among the Mongols was much more difficult – due to their nomadic lifestyle, language and religion. The Lazarists converted only few individuals and failed to develop Mongol Christian communities (Taveirne, 2004: 205).

In 1864 Congregatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae (CICM, The Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, also known as the Scheut Fathers) took over the Vicariate from the Lazarists (Tiedemann, 2009: 13). From the outset plans were made to expand the work among the Mongols. The first Vicar Theophile Verbist planned to school young Mongols at a seminary, but finding recruits proved very difficult. The CICM fathers tried to convert the few Mongol widows and wives of Chinese living in the Christian communities, as well as some Mongol refugees (Taveirne, 2004: 222-223). They distributed relief during the famine in 1876, and subsequently the number of Mongol converts rapidly increased, but decreased equally quickly as soon as the crisis was over (ibid: 244). Similarly the free distribution of medicines attracted many Mongols, but still left them unresponsive to the Christian teachings (ibid: 236).

In 1883 the Apostolic Vicariate of Mongolia was divided into three units – the Apostolic Vicariates of Central, Eastern and Southwestern Mongolia. Outer Mongolia was part of the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Mongolia. In 1922, the three Vicariates were restructured. Outer Mongolia was detached and established as mission *sui iuris* (in 1924 renamed as mission *sui iuris* of Urga).¹⁸ This meant that in theory Outer Mongolia would become an official church district. The aim to establish mission station in Urga (renamed Ulaanbaatar in 1924), was not realized due to the proclamation of the Mongolian People's Republic in 1924.

The United Brethren, also known as the Moravians were the first Protestant missionaries to attempt to evangelize a Mongol tribe. They established a settlement among the Kalmyks in 1765. The mission was unsuccessful and the community was dissolved in the early nineteenth century. However, it was one of the Moravians, Dutch Isaac Jakob Schmidt, who attempted the first modern Bible translation into Mongolian (Kalmyk dialect). The gospel of Matthew was published in St Petersburg in 1812 (Taveirne, 2004: 138-139), and the whole New Testament was translated and printed in 1827 with the support of the Russian Bible Society (ibid: 143).

The London Missionary Society (LMS), a new non-denominational evangelical society, started mission in Buryatia in 1818. They made a few converts through offering free medical

18 Giga-Catholic Information, www.gcatholic.com as accessed 17.05.2011.

help and medicines, but their major achievement was the translation and publication of the first complete Mongolian Bible (written in literary Buriat) in 1846.¹⁹ After failing from the north, LMS attempted to approach Mongolia from the south, i.e. China. The pioneer for that mission, and perhaps the best known of all the missionaries to Mongolia, was James Gilmour, who arrived in China in 1870 and worked among the Mongols for the next twenty years. He lived with the people, ate their food, learned their language, and wore their clothes. His strategy was to cure the sick, preach the gospel and distribute tracts, but he was feeling lonely a lot of the time and was rather unsuccessful in his mission.²⁰ Contrary to the Catholic fathers' strategy of converting villages and establishing small Christian communities, the LMS worked towards individual conversions (Taveirne, 2004: 257).

In 1893 the Christian Missionary Alliance sent twenty-seven Swedish volunteers to work in China and Mongolia, among them Frans August Larson. Larson lived in Ordos and Urga for many years and then set up a base in Kalgan, from where he travelled across Mongol territories distributing Bibles for the British and Foreign Bible Society.²¹ Many of the Scandinavian missionaries were killed during the Boxer rebellion and all of the mission's property was destroyed. The Swedish Mongol Mission opened three mission stations in Inner Mongolia in the early 1900s. The stations became known for their medical work and attracted many people, who after being healed showed interest in Christianity. Larson noted that despite the extensive missionary work, very few Mongols eventually converted (Larson, 1930: 262-271).

There were many Mongols living in Irkutsk in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and some converted to Orthodoxy. The first translation of the Bible and Orthodox prayer literature was done by St. Innocent of Irkutsk in the eighteenth century. Due to a trade agreement between Russia and China from 1860, there was a Russian consulate in Urga, and in 1872 the Orthodox Church was built. It functioned until 1927, even though the last priest was killed by baron Ungern-Sternberg in 1921. Eventually it was destroyed, and now only ruins remain. This church was the only Christian church in Urga before the communist revolution, thus Catholics and Protestants also attended this church.²²

19 For the story of London Missionary Society in Buryatia see e.g. Bawden (1985).

20 In *Among the Mongols* (1883) Gilmour describes his missionary experiences in Mongolia.

21 Several of the Swedish missionaries wrote memoirs of their years among the Mongols. The most famous of them is Larson's *Larson – Duke of Mongolia* (1930).

22 Interview with Father Aleksey, 14.05.2009.

Most Christian missionaries to the regions inhabited by Mongols have been primarily focused on the Chinese in Inner Mongolia, only a few had special interest in the nomads. Even if the intention was to start “mission in Outer Mongolia” it most often shifted to “mission among the Chinese in Inner Mongolia”. Mongols, like the Tibetans,²³ proved to be rather resistant to Christianity and thus there were few converts from missionary efforts among the Mongols. It did not help that the missionaries lacked sensitivity to local religious traditions and failed to empathize with the people or to take time to understand the local culture. Thus the number of Chinese and Mongol converts increased disproportionately, and there were significantly more Christians among the Chinese communities in Inner Mongolia than among the Mongols (Covell, 2001: 272-273). Most missionaries preferred to stay in towns or established mission stations, from where they traveled to the countryside for periods of time (Taveirne, 2004: 255).

One of such strategic places was Kalgan – a border city between Chinese and Mongol lands. Many missionaries used the town as a base for evangelism on the steppe. The mission centers in Kalgan included the Methodist Mission, the British and Foreign Bible Society, the Russian Orthodox, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Swedish Mongol Mission, the Norwegian Missionary Alliance,²⁴ the Seventh Day Adventists,²⁵ the CIMM, and the Missionary Canonesses of St Augustine (Kemp, 2000: 402). There were a few missionary attempts to Urga, but they mostly failed. The Swedish Mongol Mission ran a medical clinic there during the years 1920 and 1924 (Tiedemann, 2009: 222). All Christian activity in Outer Mongolia stopped after the Mongolian People’s Republic was established. Activity in Inner Mongolia continued until the Cultural Revolution in China.

The Mongolian People’s Republic period

According to estimates up to one sixth of the population (over 100,000 people) could have been Buddhist monks in Mongolia in the early 1920s. One eighth of all livestock, vast land areas, and almost complete control of foreign trade were in the hands of the Sangha. The monasteries held one-fifth of the capital assets of the country (Moses and Halkovic, 1985: 256-257).

The Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party’s (MPRP) policy echoed Stalin’s, and right from the beginning religion was considered redundant by the communists. As early as 1927,

23 See e.g. Kværne (1973).

24 Norwegian Missionary Alliance opened hospital in Kalgan in 1920, (www.misjonsalliansen.no, as accessed 05.06.2011).

25 For account of the Seventh-Day Adventist mission in Inner Mongolia see for example Christensen (1974).

Stalin pressured MPRP to eliminate religion in Mongolia. In 1930 the eighth MPRP congress declared the Mongolian Sangha to be an enemy of the state. Buddhism was called a “backward concept” that had manipulated Mongols for centuries (Jerryson, 2007: 67-71). Monks were burdened with extremely high taxes or forced to disrobe and engage in secular activities (Moses, 1977: 233-234). The terror culminated in 1937-1939 when tens of thousands monks were arrested, interrogated, beaten and shot. While the majority of the higher monks were executed or imprisoned, the lower monks were forced to join the army or the workforce (ibid: 259-260).

Mongolia witnessed a bloodbath. It is still difficult to establish even the approximate numbers of those persecuted. In the years 1937-1939 more than 20,000 people were killed by the resolutions of the Special Commission (Sandag and Kendall, 2000: 183). The number of those killed without court orders will most likely never be known. According to one estimate fifty thousand executions occurred. Every Mongolian family felt the effects of the terror (ibid: 121).

The objective was not only to eliminate the monks, but also to remove public presence of Buddhism and any relationship that people might have to it. Temples and monasteries were torn down, burned, used as prisons, or camps to house Russian soldiers (Jerryson, 2007: 68). In 1932 the Party counted 843 major religious centers (Moses, 1977: 234). In 1938, 760 out of the remaining (some were closed earlier) 771 temples and monasteries, were closed or demolished (ibid: 254). The most valuable statues and articles of gold and silver were confiscated, the rest was smashed. All books were destroyed together with the religious institutions where they were stored (Baabar, 1999: 370). According to Moses the MPRP acquired almost 5,500 buildings and fixed structures, which were used as schools, warehouses, Party meeting places, government offices or apartments (1977: 256-257).

In the summer of 1944, US Vice-President Henry Wallace announced his visit to the Soviet Union, China and Outer Mongolia. In order to prevent the US from knowing the truth about the destruction of Buddhism, Stalin suggested opening one monastery in Outer Mongolia (Jerryson, 2007: 95). Gandan, one of the very few monasteries spared major damage (it was used as Russian barracks in years 1938-1940), was repaired and reopened. A few “trustworthy” monks were sent there and instructed to hold religious ceremonies (Baabar, 1999: 402). Until 1990 Gandan was kept open with a puppet community of monks, serving as a living museum²⁶ (Bareja-Starzyńska and Havnevik, 2006: 219). All signs of religion were removed from public

26 According to Larry Moses in 1958 there were five monasteries open in Mongolia, with a total of 200 resident monks. Eighty of the monks lived in Gandan (1977: 262).

spaces. It was forbidden to speak about Buddhism or the purges. As a result several generations were completely removed from their religious history and culture, resulting in weakening of knowledge and understanding of traditional religious beliefs and practices (Jerryson, 2007: 96, 99). The Soviet influenced negative propaganda had also a great impact on Mongolian children, who used the word *lam* (i.e. monk) as an insult (ibid: 105).

According to Larry Moses by 1970 Buddhism had become “a museum piece, rather than a living faith” and he noticed “apparent lack of interest in religion on the part of the Mongolian population” (1977: 263). Furthermore he maintained that “by all available evidence, Buddhism no longer exists as a political, economic, or spiritual force in the Mongolian People’s Republic. The Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party ... has eliminated religion” (ibid. 265). The reforms, which came to Mongolia as a consequence of Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika, had a slow, but significant impact on religious repression, which began to decrease in the 1980s (Jerryson, 2007: 107).

Chapter 2

Modernization and religious change in Mongolia

Modernization is probably one of the most defining processes of our times. It is a complex notion, central to understanding the world on both global and local levels. It encompasses processes such as the industrialization, urbanization, globalization, structural differentiation, the rise of individualism and egalitarianism. Following Grace Davie, I distinguish two stages in the process of modernization: the first occurs when societies move from a pre-industrial to industrial economy. Industrialization provokes social and cultural changes, from rising educational levels to changing gender roles. The second stage takes place as the economy begins to mutate again – this time to a service-based, post-industrial mode of organization. Again, there is an associated shift in the value systems in the population (Davie, 2007: 104).

It is important to keep this division in mind when discussing the position of religion in Mongolia. What is so unusual about the Mongolian context is that the first stage of modernization, the industrialization phase, took place under Soviet domination, after total destruction of religious institutions and in conditions of forced atheism, while the second stage is beginning in a condition of democracy and freedom of belief and expression. Modernity introduced by the Soviet presupposed obligatory and state supported secularization, and indeed in 1990 the society seemed highly secular. The situation changed after the democratic revolution in 1990. Mongolians were finally allowed to reinvent their identity and relationship with religion on their own terms, in the context of modernity and democracy.

The purpose of this chapter is to set the stage for the analysis in the following chapters. My discussions revolves around the theoretical tools I find helpful for understanding of the religious scene in Mongolia after 1990 and above all, of the place of Christian missionaries in it. Modernization, secularization and revitalization are multidimensional processes which are both global and local at the same time and underline the deciding role of the specific national context in religious change. This largely theoretical chapter examines how religious institutions are transformed and how perceptions of the place of religion are renegotiated in meeting with modernity. Hopefully, as the bigger picture emerges, we will be able to appreciate the subtleties of the Mongolian religious scene and the place of Christianity and the missionaries on it.

The classical theories of modernization and Christian mission

The classical theories of modernization assume that the economically developed societies show the future to the less developed societies. The prevalent vision of modernity is homogeneous and hegemonic, professing that what happens in the West today will happen elsewhere tomorrow. It is not only expected that the whole world will follow the same pattern, it is seen as essential and beneficial to bring “modern” (in the meaning of Western) ways to the developing societies. The attitude is based on a well-intentioned and paternalistic idea that traditional values are obstacles on the road to modernization and should be abandoned (Ingelhart and Baker, 2000: 19).

In the past, Christianization was an important component of the Western modernization project. Therefore, at this point it is important to shortly comment on the relationship between modernity and Christian mission. According to David Bosch, it was during the Middle Ages that Christianity stopped being just a geographical concept and became ‘the West’, an idea where Christianity played a central role (1991: 230). This is apparent in the English language distinction between Christianity, meaning religious system, and Christendom referring to the territorial dimension of Christianity and the idea of a single inherited civilization (Walls, 2007: 36-37). The end of fifteenth century marked the beginning of European colonial expansion and a new missionary era. From that time onwards, Christianity, that had become thoroughly shaped by and identified with the lifestyle and thinking of Europe, had to expand its horizon and its theology to accommodate a much bigger and more diverse world (ibid: 28).

Those sent to Christianize the colonized territories were for the first time called ‘missionaries’, and their assignment was called ‘mission.’ Before that the church used phrases such as: “propagation of the reign of Christ” and “illuminating the nations”, while the Latin word *missio* was used to denote the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit in the doctrine of the Trinity. Thus the word ‘mission’ in the sense of sending envoys to proclaim the gospel among non-Christians, is historically linked with the colonial era, and the idea of European superiority and domination. Mission meant the activities by which Western Christendom and civilization were extended into the rest of the world (Bosch, 1991: 227-229).

Mission writers eagerly elaborated on the blessings Christian mission had bestowed upon the non-Western societies in areas such as education and medicine. While these achievements are generally applauded, they went hand in hand with imposing Western cultural patterns, the lack of appreciation of the culture of the host countries and conviction that the whole world should be

reshaped into the image of the West (ibid: 293-294). Religion and culture went hand in hand as the missionaries transmitted Western culture along with the gospel, as a “civilization package” (Sharpe, 1983: 137). Gombrich and Obeyesekere write at length about process of gradual denigration of the traditional localized Buddhist values in Sri Lanka after exposure to colonialism and the Protestant missionaries in late nineteenth century. The new, Western very bourgeois values paired with Protestant Buddhism came to substitute the traditional village values to a point where the traditional Buddhism became associated with “peasant society and economy and a peasant moral code” (1988: 202-215).

Whether they intended it or not, the missionaries became promoters of the idea that modernity and Christianity are connected. In discussing the ways in which Western evangelical missionaries in colonial South Africa were “cultural agents” of capitalism, Jean and John Comaroff point out that the missionaries not only engaged in converting non-believers to their faith, but also in teaching the specific discipline, moral order and economy, which are associated with the “Protestant ethic” as part of a program to promote capitalism and reconstruct the societies where they worked (1992: 246-258).

Multiple modernities

During the course of the twentieth century, and especially in its second half, the understanding of the role of the missionary as well as the relationship between Western and non-Western Christians changed dramatically. As the center of gravity in the Christian world shifted southward, the attitude began to alter from Euro-centrism to pluralism. Gradually the churches in the developing world began to challenge the sender-recipient relationship with their European and American equivalents, and they demanded equal partnership (Davie, 2007: 207).

Also the homogeneous and hegemonic vision of modernity, professing that what happens in the West today will happen elsewhere tomorrow, is increasingly challenged by social and cultural changes in the developing world. While the core content postulated by modernization theory is still valid: economic development is linked with changes in culture, society and politics, the changes, however, do not always take the anticipated course. It is not possible to assume a linear evolution in the modernizing processes various societies go through. (ibid: 105).

Different societies follow different trajectories even when they are subjected to the same forces of economic development (Ingelhart and Baker, 2000: 49). The world does not blindly follow the West, and the Western model can no longer be assumed to be the archetype for the rest

of the world. Instead, modernization has taken directions greatly influenced by specific cultural contexts, traditions and historical experiences. Following Gary Hamilton, although capitalism has become the dominant way of life, civilizational contexts play an important role in structuring the organization of societies, he states: “What we witness with the development of a global economy is not increasing uniformity, in the form of a universalization of Western culture, but rather the continuation of civilizational diversity through the active reinvention and reincorporation of non-Western civilizational patterns” (Hamilton, 1994: 184).

It is at this point that Shmuel Eisenstadt’s concept of multiple modernities becomes useful. It proposes an understanding of modernity which does not necessarily equal Westernization. The move from singular to plural is the move from Western imperialism to constructive analysis of the variety of individual cultural responses to the processes of modernization. Western patterns do not represent the only “authentic” modernity, though they have historical precedence and continue to be a basic reference point for others. According to Eisenstadt, diversity is an integral part of the process; it is a part of modernity itself. The best way to understand the contemporary world is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a variety of unique expressions of modernity (2000: 1-2).

While the common starting point is the version of modernity as it developed in the West, the contemporary world is filled with a multiplicity of cultural and social formations greatly differing from the original. The West no longer has the monopoly on modernity. The diversity proves that modernity is a fluid process, in which the civilizational, cultural, and religious contexts of the society in question lead to a constant selection, reinterpretation, and reformulation of the imported ideas, resulting in continual innovation. Under the changing historical forces, new patterns emerge, giving rise to new interpretations of modernity (ibid: 24).

The West, the East and the new Mongolian identity

Throughout this chapter I use the expressions ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ societies. It needs to be clarified, however, that I do not perceive these two categories as homogeneous entities. Quite the contrary, I believe that the concept of multiple modernities helps to underscore the tremendous variation in the world, as each society finds ways to redefine modernity in its own terms. The distinction between the West and the non-West is important for the present discussion for two reasons. First of all, as I showed above, in the past Christian mission was thoroughly welded together with the ideas of civilization and modernity as well as Western cultural

imperialism. And while the attitude of the missionaries has changed tremendously, the association of Western Christianity with modernization as well as the expansion through the communication networks of seemingly uniform Western (above all American) cultural programs and visions (Eisenstadt, 2000: 16) need to be remembered as factors potentially affecting the missionary enterprise and the reception of Christianity.

Mongolia underwent tremendous social and cultural transformations in the last two decades and is a country of enormous contrasts. In the earlier years of transition, the “real Mongolians” were the families living on the steppe, but today many young urban Mongolians have seldom or never been to the countryside and perceive the herders as old-fashioned and rough (Benwell, 2006: 114). On the one hand Mongolians have discovered that their culture is unique and worth preserving, on the other many, especially young people in Ulaanbaatar are attracted to the Western (and South Korean) urban lifestyle. Mongolia is one of the countries with the youngest population in the world,²⁷ and many of the young urban Mongolians know little about herding practices and have never set up a *ger*.²⁸ While traditional throat singing and Shamanist²⁹ rituals are performed in concert halls for the benefit of foreign tourists, young Mongolians dance in clubs to Western music. The learning and use of the classical Uighur script was encouraged after the transformation of 1990, but the young people are often more interested in learning English or Korean.³⁰

Secondly the issue relates to the special geographical position of Mongolia between Russia and China. Mongolia is a bridge between West and East. The Soviet attempt to modernize and Europeanize the nomads, alienated some Mongolians from their traditional Asian identity and culture.³¹ Now the redefinition of “Mongolness” within the new contexts of democracy, modernity, freedom and urbanization is a burning issue for many. Modernity and tradition do not need to stand in opposition. Although Mongolians accept the basic tenants of modernity, they are

27 Half of the population is under eighteen years old (UNICEF, 2003: 6).

28 Interview with Markus Dubach, 27.05.2009.

29 It is my experience that Mongolians refer to the pre-Buddhist beliefs that are being revived as ‘Shamanism’. Therefore when speaking of the revival of Mongolian pre-Buddhist beliefs after 1990 I use the terms Shamanism and neo-Shamanism.

30 The attempt to reintroduce the Uighur script has been given up

31 These issues come across clearly in the discussion of contextualization in chapter five with regard to the discussion of which elements of the Mongolian culture should be incorporated to Christianity. The Soviet imposed westernization of certain rituals has changed people's perception of what is Mongolian tradition.

creating space for expression of national distinctiveness. At the same time, Mongolians maintain this combined identity, which makes them neither completely Asian nor Western.³²

On the one hand, many Mongolians look into the distant past for inspiration and try to reconnect with their history and culture (Humphrey, 1992: 375), while on the other hand, they are redefining this history and culture within the modern reality. The perfect example is the cult of Chinggis Khan. Chinggis Khan was worshiped first as an ancestor, then as a deity, and later incorporated into Buddhism as the Bodhisattva Vajrapani (Charleux, 2010). During communism he was depicted as a ruthless, barbaric conqueror in the official Soviet-approved history books. Since 1990, the religious cult has been revived and the historical role of Chinggis Khan has been reassessed. Interestingly, he has not only been acknowledged as a Mongolian hero, identity-giver and nation founder, but is also increasingly being seen as the father of globalization, democracy and modern communication.³³

Multiple modernities and religion

Acknowledging the existence of a multiplicity of continually evolving modernities has several consequences for religious and wider cultural processes. The modernization process is context dependent. It is neither linear nor homogeneous. Recognizing this opens new space in the discourse of the place of religion in the world. First of all it is important to recognize that the use of the term 'religion' is somewhat misleading, as it suggests an entity. The category of religion consists of many elements, and I agree with James Beckford's assessment that religion is a social and cultural construct with highly variable meaning, and the term does not denote anything fixed or essential beyond the meanings it carries in particular social and cultural contexts. Moreover, according to Beckford, religion does not exist independently of human actors and social institutions, it does not have agency to "do" anything by itself. Rather, it is an interpretative category and a subject to constant negotiation and renegotiation (2003: 4-5). When I speak of 'religion' it implies a dynamic category encompassing religious institutions, beliefs and practice and, as my analysis will show, these elements should not be treated as uniform nor expected to respond to the changing circumstances in identical ways.

Knowing that modernity does not necessarily follow the European model of development elsewhere in the world, it is irrational to assume religion would do so. The forms of religiosity

³² Interview with Markus Dubach, 01.06.2009.

³³ Ibid.

are as diverse as the forms of modernity. While on the one hand individualism induced by modernization makes it easier for people to change or abandon what they perceive as tradition, in the process of de-traditionalization, on the other hand, we can observe in many places invention and reinvention of traditions (Smart, 2004: 87). Religious elements are being creatively adopted and readopted within the new contexts. Indeed, across the world cosmologies, religious beliefs and practices in modern reality are astonishingly diverse.

Religion lies in the center of the Mongolian discourse between the modern and the traditional. Buddhism is seen as a major ingredient of the new national identity and Shamanism is gaining popularity as the oldest Mongolian religion. For many to be Mongolian means to be a Buddhist,³⁴ but Buddhism is changing as a result of influence of the international Buddhist community and in meeting with other religious traditions present in Mongolia (most notably the Christian missionaries). And besides the restoration of genuine pre-Buddhist traditions, a kind of Mongolian neo-Shamanism came into existence in the 1990s (Balogh, 2010: 229).

I find the theory of multiple modernities especially useful for considering the transformations in Christian mission in the second half of the twentieth century. Just as the West no longer has monopoly on modernity, it no longer has monopoly on Christianity. Modernization does not equal Westernization. Even if the premise is similar everywhere, the process depends on the local conditions and the developments differ significantly between societies with different cultural backgrounds. As non-Western societies reject the Western version of modernity and reinvent it within their contexts, they also reject the Western version of Christianity. During the twentieth century, and especially in its second half, there has been a shift of emphasis in contemporary Christian mission towards a greater tolerance for diversity. The current perspective in the majority of Christian churches is that the core is the same, but the expressions depend on the context. Christianity is not synonymous with Western Christianity. There are clear parallels between the recognition of multiple modernities and the acceptance of indigenous, contextualized versions of Christianity, which will be further elaborated in the last chapter.

Is there such a thing as a common communist context?

Although Mongolia was not part of the Soviet Union, it was strongly influenced by it and implemented a majority of the same policies, thus the former Soviet Republics and democratic

34 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009; Gertrude Dubach, 25.05.2009; Mungun, Baaska and Otgoo, 18.05.2009.

Mongolia share a somewhat similar history. Following my argument that context is the key to understanding the creation of the individual versions of modernity (and religiosity), it is important to see whether there is such a thing as a common communist context and whether there are any parallels between the developments on the religious scene in the former communist countries. According to Ronald Inglehart and Wayne Baker, the answer is ‘yes’. They have tested whether economic development is linked with systematic changes in basic values. Using data from the three waves of the World Values Surveys, which included sixty-five societies and seventy-five percent of the world's population, they have found evidence that societies sharing common cultural background follow at least partially parallel paths of development and change in meeting with modernization processes (2000: 1).

Although one should be very cautious with such general worldwide surveys, the communist legacy left enduring imprint on the people who lived under it. Communist-style industrialization was especially favorable to secularization, while the communist regimes undertook campaigns, often using both psychological and physical force, to eradicate traditional religious values. They seem to have had some success, as the former communist societies appeared relatively secular (*ibid*: 41). However, after the socialist system fell a “broad religious renaissance ... flourished throughout the region in the 1990s” (Wanner, 2007: 2). To understand how this could happen, it is now time to look more closely at the theory of secularization.

The dimensions of secularization

The theory of secularization could be described as a sub-theory of the classical theories of modernization. For a long time it was one of the main theoretical and analytical tools used in the social sciences to explain the relationship of religion and modernity. The classical social thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including Durkheim, Marx and Weber, thought that religion would either disappear or gradually become irrelevant with the expansion of modern institutions. The growth of scientific and medical knowledge, democracy, capitalism and the development of a welfare state, have expanded human capacity to control, manage and govern spheres of threat and neutralized some of the major existential risks. As the world became more rational, guided by science and knowledge, in a process by Weber called: “the disenchantment of the world”, religion seemed gradually to lose its relevance and influence in modern society. It was expected to be at best a marginal and ineffective force (McGuire, 1992: 263).

However, at some point in the second half of the twentieth century, winds turned, and it became painfully obvious that religion not only did not disappear, like it was predicted, but seemed to be growing in strength and numbers in many parts of the globe. In recent decades, scholars have attempted to delineate more clearly the contents, plausibility and applicability of the category ‘secularization’.

Peter Berger, in his early work in the 1960s, strongly advocated the classical secularization theory, postulating that pluralism lead to a multiplication of choices and worldviews in a given society and created conditions for increased competition. The result was undermining of credibility of the previously monopolistic tradition and loss of its “taken for granted” status (1967: 151). It is true that the effect of the relatively untamed flow of people, capital, information and ideas on religious traditions of the world cannot be underestimated. In the era of internet, knowledge about different religions is just a Google search away. Pluralism is the reality of all democratic nations, whether representatives of the dominant religion like it or not. Conscious consumers expect the market rules to apply to religion as well.

However, later studies have shown that competition, does not necessarily contribute to secularization, it may as well lead to greater religious participation and to more people embracing religious worldviews (Martin, 1999: 41). Furthermore, as the section about Buddhism in Mongolia in next chapter will show, pluralism may provoke changes in the previously monopolistic religion, when it is forced to compete for members.

Also Peter Berger has in later years altered his opinion, stating that modernization, although it had some secularizing effect in parts of the globe, resulted in powerful counter-secularization elsewhere (1999: 2-3). Moreover, he argues that counter-secularization is at least as important a phenomenon in the contemporary world as secularization. On one hand modernization processes of differentiation, privatization, and individualization are strengthened, while on the other, we experience de-secularization, de-differentiation and deprivatization around the world (ibid: 6). In a reality of multiple modernities it is logical that secularization is not necessarily a fixed, predefined one-way process.

Sociologist José Casanova affirms that secularization does not necessarily go hand in hand with modernization. He sees secularization as a multidimensional concept, where the dimensions often act independently and need to be considered separately. The three components he distinguishes are: secularization as structural differentiation, secularization as decline of

religious beliefs and practices, and secularization as privatization of religion. And it is important to examine and test the validity of each of the three dimensions independently, to see the full picture (1994: 211). Largely in agreement with Casanova, I believe that secularization as a concept should not be abandoned but nuanced. The world picture with regard to religion is not uniform, analyzing the different components of the concept separately and in relation to each other, as well as in the context of other modernizing processes, will enable a more accurate examination of religious change in contemporary Mongolia.

For Casanova differentiation is the essential core of secularization. Functional differentiation is the process in which social functions historically carried out by religious institutions and personnel (healthcare, education, care for the poor, etc.) are taken over by the state and secular institutions. This results in a redefinition of the roles played by religion and religious institutions in society and poses challenges to religion's public influence, as churches and church representatives lose their monopolies on social services. The differentiation of the secular sphere from the influence of religious institutions remains one of the primary characteristics of modern societies. However, it is important to separate between the general historical trend of structural differentiation and the diverse ways in which different religions in different places respond to and are affected by it (ibid: 212).

Moreover if we accept that modernities are multiple, it follows that not all of them embody the notion of secularization, perhaps even minority does (Davie, 2007: 13). For example, distinct difference between the two bastions of modernity – western Europe and America – can be observed. It proves that modern functional differentiation does not automatically lead to decline in religious beliefs and practices or the privatization of religion. It may be tempting to focus on the dwindling church attendance and decrease in the importance of institutional religion in parts of Europe that was an outcome of differentiation.³⁵ However, it would mean overlooking the success of religious institutions elsewhere, and to fail to see the multiplicity of modernities and its diverse and contradictory effects on religions and believers.³⁶

35 Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart note that there are significant differences between some countries. In Ireland and Italy, for example, church attendance is still high, but even there the trends are pointing downward (Norris and Inglehart, 2007: 34-35)

36 While the institutional religion is in decline in many parts of Europe, scholars are increasingly turning towards the growing interest in New Age and alternative spiritualities and speaking of change and individualization of religiosity instead of decrease, see e.g. Davie (2002 and 2007) and Turner (ed.) (2010). Furthermore, while this study is mostly concerned with institutional religion, and interest in alternative spiritualities is beyond its scope, the growing popularity of New Age Shamanism in Mongolia is noted in chapter three.

In Europe, when education and healthcare began to be taken over by secular specialists, religious institutions experienced general decline in their influence in the public sphere. The functional differentiation has taken its toll on European religious institutions, as they became marginalized, and religion was relegated to a more private realm. Casanova observes that churches, which have vigorously refused to accommodate modernizing processes of differentiation and have given up their privileged and dominant status – notably the state churches of Europe – are the ones most affected by the decline of religious vitality. It seems like the more religious leaders resist the process of modern differentiation, the more they tend to suffer decline in the long run. The failure of the European state churches to change with the tide cost them their credibility in society. To the contrary, those religious leaders, which early on accepted and embraced differentiation, are in a better position both to survive and to adapt to a free market, as proven by the case of United States, where the structural separation of state and religion has been enforced from the beginning. Concluding, Casanova states that the decline in institutional religiosity in Europe is a result of particular European conditions and not a blueprint for the relation between modernity and secularization. The effect of functional differentiation on religion is dependent on the specific context (Casanova, 1994: 214). It is now time to return to the discussion of the parallels between Soviet Union and Mongolia.

Secularization or revitalization?

While institutional religion in western Europe has gradually lost influence and individuals gave up allegiance voluntarily, in the Soviet Union secularization was forced, abrupt, and obligatory. At least two of the dimensions of secularization were totally enforced. While the actual level of religious beliefs in the society is difficult to measure, differentiation was fully implemented and religion was removed from the public sphere. However, it turned out that seventy years of communist rule did not eradicate religion in the USSR. This state-imposed decline of religion appeared to gradually reverse after the system collapsed, bringing a resurgence of religious orientations. Ingelhart and Baker search for the explanation of this revival in difficult living conditions in the former Soviet republics. Due to the collapse of the economic, social, and political systems of the Soviet Union in 1990-1991, life in the successor states has become insecure and unpredictable, and life expectancy has actually fallen. The temples and churches have become havens for the masses, against a background of economical and political turbulence (2000: 45-46). Peter Berger also subscribes to the theory that uncertainty is a condition that many

people find to be intolerable, therefore, religious movements that promise to provide or to renew certainty have great appeal (1999: 11).

As I mentioned earlier, in Mongolia the number of people who admitted to believing in some kind of religion rose from thirty percent in 1990 to seventy percent in 2000 (Atwood, 2004: 468), a figure way above the average for industrial societies. The loss of security resulting from economic, political, and social collapse could be seen as one of the factors leading to reversing of the trend towards secularization, bringing religious resurgence, proving once again that the individual versions of modernity are by no means finished and static. On the contrary, they are fluid, open to reinterpretation and reinvention if the conditions change.

Catherine Wanner has studied evangelical communities in Ukraine and discovered that although the communist regime violently suppressed the institutions and clergy of the Orthodox Church and secularized the public sphere to an impressive level, it would be a mistake to assume that belief was eradicated, as these are two distinct processes. As the state took control of property, education and social services, religion was relocated to private sphere. And although religious practice and knowledge were being gradually replaced by ignorance or indifference with each passing generation, the religious susceptibility remained (2007: 2-3).

A somewhat parallel process seems to have taken place in Mongolia. As shown in the previous chapter, the communist government actively destroyed Buddhism through killing and persecution of monks and religious leaders, and destruction of temples, religious texts and sacred objects. As a result, Buddhist practice had to be concealed and a big part of scriptural and ritual understanding was lost. However, in Mongolia, just as in Ukraine, despite the obstacles, the religious sentiment had not vanished. This could at least partially explain the somewhat unexpected³⁷ religious renaissance in the region in the 1990s (ibid: 2). It also shows how misleading it is to equate differentiation and privatization with decline of religious beliefs.³⁸ As Wanner and Inglehart and Baker have shown, the pattern was similar in most post-communist

37 E.g. Larry Moses maintained that by 1970 Buddhism had become museum piece. He thought that religion had been successfully eliminated by the communists (Moses, 1977: 263-265).

38 Comparative research from China shows that as soon as the authorities became more lenient towards religious and cultural practices in minority areas, e.g. particularly among Tibetans in the 1980s, religion blossomed, but the new freedom also raised political awareness and inspired nationalist feelings. As a result demonstrations against the government were staged. The Chinese authorities felt threatened and again instituted harsh repercussions (see e.g. Goldstein and Kapstein (eds), 1998; Barnett and Akiner (eds), 1994). During the last decade, however, the authorities have encouraged a controlled revival of Buddhism among the Han population, and Buddhism is now seen as a way to strengthen Chinese traditional values, in the attempt to create a “harmonious society” (see e.g. Wellens, 2010).

countries. Although the secularization process seemed advanced during socialism, after the transition to democracy people started openly practicing and declaring being religious.

Concluding remarks

The concept of individual modernities allows for more than one process to be taking place at the same time in any given society, as different religious communities adapt to the changing world. Thus, for example secularization and revitalization can be present side by side in the same society (Davie, 2007: 100). Analyzing the different dimensions of secularization independently shows that secularization and revitalization coexist in Mongolia after the 1990 transformation. While the separation of state and religion, as well as functional differentiation are strictly upheld by the law, there appears to be an increase in people's beliefs and practice.

Mongolians are trying to establish their place on the global spiritual map within the context of a modern democracy, and the next chapters intend to show that the processes of secularization and revitalization, traditionalization and de-traditionalization, differentiation and de-differentiation are all in operation. Within the Mongolian version of modernity, there is place for Christianity, Buddhism, Shamanism and neo-Shamanism, as well as for a plethora of other spiritual paths (including atheism) in a pluralist mosaic. Perhaps the best way to illustrate the pluralism and the religious climate in contemporary Mongolia is to reminisce one week in August 2006 – a week when Ulaanbaatar hosted Dalai Lama, Indian meditation guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and a Christian evangelist Peter Youngren, each of them gathering large crowds of followers and sympathizers.

Chapter 3

Religious scene in Mongolia after 1990

Christian missionaries are bound to work within the specific Mongolian context, while at the same time they act as agents of change. In a reality of modern democracy and legislated freedom of belief, no religion can maintain monopoly. My goal in this chapter is to try to paint a picture of the Mongolian religious scene, by which I understand the political (legal) and cultural (religious) framework within which Christian missionaries work to promote their religious convictions and gain converts. This chapter plays a double role. On the one hand I study the religious scene in Mongolia as the background for the Christian mission, while on the other I look at the way Christian missionaries influence the religious scene in Mongolia.

First of all, this chapter examines implementation and interpretation of new laws meant to accommodate freedom of religion and the pluralist reality (most evident in the number of Christian missionaries active in Mongolia), i.e. the articles of the new Constitution, which deal with religious matters, and the Law on Relationship of State and Religious Institutions. This section takes up issues of how the missionaries manage to maneuver the limitations and possibilities created by the law. In the second part of the chapter I observe the revival of Buddhism and Shamanism as well as the impact of modernization, globalization and the Christian missionary activities on the revival. This chapter is meant to shed some light on the interrelations between Christians and the largely non-Christian Mongolian society. It also points to certain typical challenges of a modern, multi-religious society where advocates of changes and adaptation clash with conservative traditionalists.

Legal context – the legislated freedom of religion

The 12th of February 1992 marked an important moment for the young democracy – the former Mongolian People's Republic acquired a new Constitution, a new name, and new coat of arms. The Constitution consists of a preamble and seventy articles. It is divided into six chapters. It proclaims Mongolia an independent democratic republic, which guarantees for its citizens' basic civil, political and social rights, such as justice, freedom of speech, equality, right to education and medical care, property ownership; it also states that Mongolia shall have a "multistructured economy". The President, who is directly elected, serves a four-year term and presides over the

National Security Council and the armed forces. The seventy six members of the State Great Khural (Mongolian parliament) are also elected directly for a four-year term.

Agreeing on a text of the new Constitution was no easy task and the drafting committee went through many fierce disputes. One of the discussed issues was whether Buddhism should be proclaimed the state religion. Eventually the idea was abandoned in favor of a vague formulation in the preamble about “the traditions of national statehood, history and culture” (Juergensmeyer, 1994: 121). In this context it is interesting to read article twelve, chapter one, of the Constitution, which deals with “the symbols of the independence and sovereignty of Mongolia”³⁹. They consist of the State Emblem, Banner, Flag, Seal and Anthem which “shall express the historical tradition, aspiration, unity, justice and the spirit of the people of Mongolia”. The way in which the State Emblem is described, incorporating typical pre-Buddhist (the eternal blue sky) and Buddhist (the white lotus) symbols, clearly refers to the two religions which have shaped the Mongolian national identity.

Religion is specifically mentioned in three separate articles of the Constitution. Article fourteen guarantees freedom from discrimination on the basis of religion and article sixteen lists the rights of citizens, among others, freedom of conscience and religion. Article nine of the Constitution clearly establishes separation of religious and secular institutions: “(1) The State shall respect the religions and the religions shall honor the State. (2) State institutions shall not engage in religious activities and the Church shall not carry out political activities. (3) The relationship between the State and the Church shall be regulated by law”. Mark Juergensmeyer suggests that the clause which prohibits monasteries from assuming political power is intended to guard against the return of a theocratic state and power once enjoyed by the Jibzundamba Khutugtu (1994: 121). The last clause of article nine refers to the Law on the Relationship of State and Religious Institutions, adopted in 1993. This document outlines the specific legal environment for the functioning of religious groups in Mongolia.

Several clauses in this law have caused much debate and controversy among Mongolia’s religious communities. In December 1993, when local papers published the text of the new law, Christians reacted quickly, claiming that it discriminated against Christianity. All the different Christian groups came together to talk about the possible course of action. Freedom of religion and human rights were discussed. Pastor Dashdendev, with the support of the Democratic Party,

39 All quotes come from the English text of the Constitution available at www.mfat.gov.mn (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Mongolia) as accessed 15.03.2011.

appealed to Mongolia's Constitutional Court against several of its provisions. Tom Ginsburg and Gombosuren Ganzorig mention also that several dozen British MPs sent a letter of protest, and foreign officials hinted that the law might have adverse effects on foreign aid (1996: 158-159). The mostly criticized clauses were the ones prohibiting religious activity in state owned buildings, banning foreigners from propagating their religion unless specifically invited to Mongolia for that purpose, and giving special rights to Buddhism, Islam and Shamanism. Dashdendev argued that the law was meant to discriminate against Christians. At that time all buildings were owned by the state, including all apartments, since there was no law regulating private property, and obtaining a religious visa was impossible.⁴⁰

The court sent the law back to parliament, ordering three clauses to be rescinded. These were: Article 7 section 6: “The cultivation, propaganda, and the education of any religion with the exception of Buddhism, Islam and Shamanism are prohibited in Mongolia beyond the monasteries and churches of the respective religions”, article 9 section 2: “The official positions and conclusions of the head organizations of the respective religions shall be required in the establishment of the ... monastery ...”, and article 12 section 2: “The foreign citizens and the persons without nationality are prohibited from doing religious propaganda in Mongolia unless this person comes to Mongolia under the auspices of registered religious organizations”⁴¹.

In the current version of the law the state accepts the “predominant status of Buddhism in Mongolia in order to respect the historical traditions of harmony and civilization of the people of Mongolia,” however, “this shall not obstruct citizens from believing in other religions” (article 4 section 2). This has allowed the government to fund rebuilding and rehabilitation of several Buddhist monasteries as a part of Mongolian culture, despite the separation of church and state written in the constitution. The state does not support religious groups in any other way.⁴²

Religious groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) must register with local and provincial authorities as well as the General Authority of State Registration to function legally. The registrations are valid for twelve months and must be renewed annually. The International Religious Freedom Report from 2010 lists the following documentation to be necessary when applying to register: a letter requesting registration, a letter from the city council or other local authority granting approval to conduct religious services, a brief description of the

40 Interview with Pastor Dashdendev, 29.05.2009.

41 The rescinded clauses are taken from the booklet *Pillar: Christian Churches Information, Mongolian* (2004); all other quotes are from the English translation of the law available at www.religlaw.org, as accessed 19.04.2011.

42 U.S. Department of State (2010) Mongolia.

organization, its charter, documentation of its founding, a list of leaders, financial information and brief biographic information on the person wishing to conduct religious services and the expected number of worshipers.⁴³

Some groups admit that the obligatory renewal process every year is tiresome. The registrations are handled during a special committee meeting for religious registration, where representatives from the immigration office, city council, intelligence agency and advisers need to be present. Finding time for such a meeting, suitable for all parties involved, proves to be not easy.⁴⁴ One faith-based NGO admitted to missing the deadline for work permit renewal with one day and being issued a 600,000 Tugrik⁴⁵ fine in result.⁴⁶ There seems to be a general perception that corruption is common. I was repeatedly told by foreigners that in Mongolia every problem can be solved with money. However, it seems to be more of a general issue and not directed solely towards the Christian missionaries. An Australian Buddhist monk Thubten Gyatso associated with the Federation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), which runs a center in Ulaanbaatar, admits that sometimes government officials come up with some legal “obstacles,” and suggest that they could be resolved with a certain amount of money.⁴⁷

Some Christian groups complain about difficulties with obtaining registration,⁴⁸ however, the reality is that temples and churches often function freely without it.⁴⁹ Pastor Dashdendev has applied to register the First Church, where he is one of the leaders, years ago, but the application was never answered.⁵⁰ One American missionary group I spoke with claims to have been refused registration many times. The reason was supposedly the high number of churches in Ulaanbaatar. Currently the organization is registered as an NGO with the church functioning without problems in the same building.⁵¹ Pastor Dashdendev confirms that the government gives high number of churches as reason for denying registrations.⁵² According to Paul Kotanko, the director of the Mongolian Adventist Association, registration depends on the attitudes of the local governments

43 Ibid.

44 Interview with Paul Kotanko, 01.06.2009.

45 About 480 U.S. dollars, exchange rate from 03.06.2011.

46 Interview with Bill Cooper, 11.05.2009.

47 Interview with Thubten Gyatso, 07.05.2009.

48 I have heard these complaints on several occasions from the evangelical Protestant churches. The Russian Orthodox Church and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints claim that registration is a straightforward process. The Catholic Church reports some problems during the years 2009-2010.

49 This is a common opinion, repeated in many of the conversations I had with church leaders.

50 Interview with Pastor Dashdendev, 29.05.2009.

51 The missionary asked to be anonymous.

52 Interview with Pastor Dashdendev, 29.05.2009.

in the respective *aimags*,⁵³ some are very hostile, while others are more open and positive.⁵⁴ He acknowledges that the law is not perfect and creates gray areas that make it difficult, especially for young churches. The problem is that in order to obtain registration the church needs to be already established and working, but to be allowed to do any activity, the church has to be registered. Additionally, Kotanko says: “you have to own a building to be registered, but you have to be registered to own a building, so you’re in a bit of a catch 22.”⁵⁵ It is a problem for foreigners, who may lose their visas if they are not properly registered. Apparently, things are easier for larger, known denominations. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Mongolia is registered as a local religious organization and all buildings are bought in the name of the Mongolian Adventist Association.⁵⁶

While Christian organizations complain on the legal trouble, from the local government’s perspective it may be difficult to understand why churches need separate registrations. The Protestant missionaries have downplayed the denominational divisions from the start,⁵⁷ and as a result Mongolians do not understand why they cannot work together. Why does each Christian group need to build a separate church, if they are all Christian, especially if often there is only one Buddhist monastery in the area? Markus Dubach, a long term Swiss missionary, recalls a case from Khovd *aimag*, where four evangelical churches applied for registration. As there was only one Buddhist monastery in the province, the government representatives felt that allowing for registration of so many churches would cause imbalance and people would accuse them of favoring Christianity. After long debates, the different Christian groups came to an agreement and registered as one, but it did not take long before new groups came asking for registration.⁵⁸

According to the International Religious Freedom Report, in the beginning of 2010 there were 511 registered places of worship, 254 of which were Buddhist, 198 Christian, forty-four Muslim, seven Shamanist, five Baha’i, and three uncategorized. In the first half of 2010, the State General Registration Office registered thirty-seven churches, twenty mosques, and three

53 An *aimag* is a province, and Mongolia is divided into twenty-one *aimags*. Each of the *aimags* is further divided into a number of *sums*. There are 329 *sums* in Mongolia, with on average 5,000 inhabitants in each.

54 Both Buddhists and Christians I have spoken to admit that sometimes interpretation and implementation of the laws are affected by the personal convictions of the clerk.

55 It is also difficult for young churches without support from abroad to afford a building in Ulaanbaatar. For example Pastor Ganbat from Hope Church had plans to start his own church in near future, but was very worried about the financial and registration aspect (interview, 22.05.2009).

56 Interview with Paul Kotanko, 01.06.2009.

57 The issue of Protestant denominations in Mongolia is dealt with in chapter four.

58 Interview with Markus Dubach, 27.05.2009.

Shamanist temples. Evangelical Christians estimate that there are 250 unregistered evangelical churches throughout the country.⁵⁹ According to Pastor Dashdendev, in 2009 there were about 500 evangelical churches in Ulaanbaatar, including house churches, which meet regularly every Sunday. The house churches have a leader, who can lead the Sunday service and have at least thirty members.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the Religious Freedom Report states that ninety percent of Mongolians consider themselves Buddhist, while about four percent are Christian,⁶¹ making the number of Christian churches disproportionately high compared to the number of Buddhist temples – if one looks at the fraction of population professing each of the respective religions.

While churches can in practice function freely without registration, foreigners need visa to stay in Mongolia legally. Because it is not always easy to obtain religious visa, some foreign missionary groups register as non-governmental organizations. One strategy used by some missionaries is to come to Mongolia on a student visa and then later register as a non-governmental organization.⁶² Many of these NGOs engage in social work, but it also happens that religious organizations and churches use the NGO status to proselytize, while their contribution to the society is questionable.⁶³ The government is aware of these problems and is trying to discover and close organizations that break the rules.⁶⁴ The rules for combining development work with missionary activities have become stricter and controls more frequent. Some organizations have lost their permits and foreign missionaries have been expelled from Mongolia. Obtaining registration as a religious organization has become more difficult, thus some groups have registered as NGOs instead.⁶⁵ The Roman Catholic Church reports tightening of the rules and more frequent controls in the years 2009-2010, resulting in problems with registration of mission stations as well as threats of closing one of their children's centers.⁶⁶ It

59 U.S. Department of State (2010) Mongolia.

60 Interview with Pastor Dashdendev, 29.05.2009.

61 U.S. Department of State (2010) Mongolia.

62 This method was used for example, by a group of Americans, who came to Mongolia in 1998.

63 This is a view repeated in many conversations. Some missionaries I spoke to are also concerned that these "fake NGOs" lead to bad reputation and cause suspicion from the government and common people towards Christianity.

64 Interview with Paul Kotanko, 01.06.2009.

65 I have been in contact with a Christian organization that has been registered as a branch of an international Christian organization for five years. In 2008 they were accused of breaking the law and had to close. The foreign missionaries associated with it were expelled from Mongolia. The organization re-registered as a local Mongolian NGO, with a Mongolian general secretary and only Mongolians as official employees. Foreigners working in the organization are officially associated with a different organization. As long as officially there are no foreigners in the NGO, they are allowed to function without any problems. Due to ethical considerations, I have chosen not to make the identity of the group known.

66 Catholic Church in Mongolia, www.catholicchurch-mongolia.mn, as accessed 05.05.2011.

appears to be a vicious circle of accusations and suspicions on both sides. Pastor Rob Forbes admits that there have been cases of dishonesty on the part of some missionaries about the kind of activities they were planning to engage in, which caused the government to become more suspicious and introduce more restrictions.⁶⁷ These restrictions, however, may contribute to more dishonesty, as some organizations are trying to find a way to stay in Mongolia.

The clauses in the religious law that may be thought to restrain proselytizing are article 3 section 2: “it shall be prohibited to force a citizen to believe or not to believe in a religion or to limit his/her freedom of conscience and religion” and article 7 section 7: “any religious institution, lama or clergyman shall not force or compel others to accept the doctrine of their religion, attract the attention of others with money or other items, cheat or cause damage to the health and morality or disturb or upset other persons.” It is a bit unclear what is meant by “disturb or upset other persons”, as well as the section 5 of the latter article: “religious institutions ... shall be prohibited to conduct ... any activity that conflicts with the tradition and customs of the people of Mongolia”.

Other laws which concern the missionaries include one saying that foreigners who enter Mongolia on work visas are not allowed to undertake religious activities during their work hours, together with the directive which prevents schools from mixing teaching with evangelization (Ginsburg and Ganzorig, 1996: 159). This was most likely a reaction to the fact that many missionaries come to Mongolia as English teachers and use the classroom as a platform to promote their agenda. Furthermore, some Christian denominations⁶⁸ open schools meant to cater to both Christians and non-Christians, and the law is supposed to prevent them from teaching religion and proselytizing in the schools.⁶⁹ Moreover, organizations involved in providing child care, welfare, or child protection services are not allowed to promote religion or religious customs counter to the child's “national traditional religion.”⁷⁰ According to Paul Kotanko, it is forbidden by law for the churches to use health care or health education for evangelizing purposes in Mongolia. However, the government has approved the evangelical meetings organized by the Seventh-Day Adventist NGO – Adventist Mongolian Outreach Service

67 Interview with Rob Forbes, 31.05.2009.

68 Among others: the Roman-Catholic Church, several Korean evangelical groups, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church.

69 Some Christian leaders I spoke to complained that this law was discriminating Christianity. In 2009, in the time of my fieldwork a book about Buddhism for primary schools was prepared and Buddhism was to be taught in public schools as the “Mongolian tradition.”

70 U.S. Department of State (2010) Mongolia.

(AMOS) – where a lecture about health is followed by a spiritual outreach talk. People attending are, however, free to leave after the first part, and there is no obligation to stay and listen to the religious part.⁷¹

The government proposed changes to the law several times, but every time met with strong protests from the Christian environment in Mongolia as well as abroad, forcing the government to back out. For example Leatherwood mentions that many people, including the U.S. Ambassador, were petitioning to the parliament members against the bill proposed by the Ministry of Justice in 1999 and as a result the law was dropped⁷² (Leatherwood, 2006: 193).

Religious revival

Buddhism

In the early 1990s Buddhists in Mongolia began the slow process of restoration and revival. New monasteries and temples started appearing in all corners of the country, and the process of rebuilding the old destroyed places of worship was commenced. Old men, who used to be monks (Mong. *lam*), put their robes back on. There was a steady increase in young people becoming “monks” and a rise in the total number of worshipers.⁷³ Legal conditions were laid for revival of religiosity and it quickly became obvious that the party had failed to root out the deep religious beliefs. As it turned out, people defied the ideological constraints and continued to worship in secret all throughout the communist period, despite dangers and difficulties, despite the secret police constantly watching and asking questions, and neighbors and colleagues forced to spy on each other (Becker, 1992: 120). Today the revival of Buddhism is closely connected to the revival of Mongolian culture and an important constituent in establishing the new national identity (Jerryson, 2007: 111; Bareja-Starzyńska and Havnevik, 2006: 224). Thus, when polls show that ninety percent of citizens subscribe to some form of Buddhism,⁷⁴ often it illustrates a sentiment shared by many, that being a Mongol is inevitably tied with being a Buddhist.

The revival has not been easy. Many people embraced the new freedom of worship heartily, but after decades of secrecy and governmental attempts to force secularization, the Buddhism that was left in Mongolia was largely privatized and individualized (Jerryson, 2007:

71 Interview with Paul Kotanko, 01.06.2009.

72 Mathijs Pelkmans’ research of Christian proselytizing in Kyrgyzstan shows similar pressure from the Christian networks, able to utilize powerful political backing in case of any suggestion about changing the liberal religious law, and the helplessness of the government in dealing with them (2009: 429).

73 For a discussion of what it means to be a monk in Mongolia, see below.

74 U.S. Department of State (2010) Mongolia.

109). Antireligious propaganda during the Soviet time served to discredit religious institutions, leaders and ordinary monks. As a result, the perceived abuse and unethical behavior of parts of the Buddhist clergy in the past had alienated some Mongolians and made them distrust Buddhism. Still today some people express mixed feelings towards the monks, complaining that monasteries charge too much for reciting prayers and for reading the scriptures, accusing them of immoral behavior, drinking alcohol, and abusing donations.⁷⁵

Moreover, after three generations had grown up with limited or no access to knowledge of the scriptures, the liturgy, and the ceremonies, people have little understanding of rituals or their meanings. The old generation of monks, whose memories and devotion were instrumental in the first years of revival, is rapidly dying out. Thus, well educated Buddhist teachers are in



short supply (Bareja-Starzyńska and Havnevik, 2006: 221). The difficult financial situation of Mongolia is another problem. The government offers little monetary support and even though the Mongolian people constantly donate money, their funds are scarce. Most monasteries face economic problems, and are dependent on continuous contributions (ibid: 220).⁷⁶ Despite the obstacles, the revival of Buddhism has steadily been in process for the last twenty years.

From the outset Tibetan and International Buddhist communities have been instrumental in the revival. Their contribution through sending qualified teachers and providing funds has been invaluable.

Additionally Mongolian monks are being sent to India to study Buddhism in Tibetan monastic

⁷⁵ These accusations were often repeated by the Mongolian Christians I spoke to, and were listed as some of the reasons for conversion to Christianity. Christians for example stressed that churches were free while Buddhist monks charged for reciting prayers. I was also told that in the evening monks take off their Buddhist robes and go out and get drunk, which was contrasted to abstinent Christians. It needs to be noted, however, that such placing Christianity in opposition to Buddhism, complies with the reference group theory as first introduced by Herbert Hyman in 1942. It states that individuals verify their identities via comparison to a group, which serves as a reference point. The purpose may be to affirm similarities to a group or a category of persons, or to stress differences through enhancing negative images associated with a group one wishes to distance oneself from (Hynes, 1942: 94-102).

⁷⁶ Some of the Mongolian Christian leaders also recognize the difficult financial situation of Buddhism. For example Pastor Dashdendeov admitted that the lack of resources makes it more challenging for Buddhists to compete with Christian missionaries, who often have substantial funding from abroad (interview, 29.05.2009).

universities and institutions.⁷⁷ Many important personalities of the Buddhist world have been active in the work, some of them moved to Mongolia for years, among them Gurudeva Rinpoche (d. 2009), who contributed to building the Buddha Park, on the fringes of Ulaanbaatar, which features an eighteen meters tall standing statue of Buddha (photography on the previous page), Jadhoo Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist master sent to Mongolia by the Dalai Lama, and Bakula Rinpoche (d. 2003), a native of Ladakh and a highly respected monk and master of philosophy in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, who served as the Indian ambassador to Mongolia in the years 1989-2000.⁷⁸

The fourteenth Dalai Lama, who is widely revered in Mongolia and credited with helping the revival tremendously, has visited Mongolia seven times, most recently in 2006. China criticized the visits, often hinting at possible diplomatic or commercial retaliation. During the 2002 visit China suspended train services with Mongolia for two days in protest, cutting off trade and causing increase in the world price of copper, Mongolia's main export.⁷⁹ The Dalai Lama has on several occasions expressed concern about the Christian proselytizing in Mongolia.⁸⁰

Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the spiritual director of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), an international non-profit Buddhist organization, dedicated to teaching and transmission of knowledge of Mahayana Buddhism, opened a center in Ulaanbaatar in 1999 upon request from a group of lay Mongolian Buddhists. According to Thubten Gyatso one of the reasons was that Lama Zopa had heard that the Christian missionaries had been aggressively criticizing Buddhism, declaring it a superstitious relic of the past with no relevance in the modern world and even repeating the communist propaganda, about Buddhism being degenerate and monks being lazy and exploiting people.⁸¹ The purpose of the center was to teach

77 Havnevik, "Important Actors in the Propagation of Buddhism in Mongolia after the Democratic Reforms" (manuscript prepared for publication) in: Bareja-Starzyńska and Havnevik (eds.).

78 Ibid.

79 AP Wordstream, 2002, *China's disapproval of Dalai Lama's Mongolia visit affects trading on copper market in London: report*, available at <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P1-69362933.html>, as accessed 15.03.2011

80 Havnevik (manuscript). Sonam Wangchuk, Bakula Rinpoche's assistant, in his book about Rinpoche's life, recalls a story from Dalai Lama's trip to Mongolia in 1992. During this visit Dalai Lama talked about his experiences with other religions, in particular he praised the practice of compassion in Christianity and the humanitarian work done by Christians. Wangchuk writes that Christian missionaries were very active in Mongolia, often targeting the young and the poor and condemning Buddhism as backward and old fashioned. Buddhists had little resources and lacked qualified teachers who could counter the accusations. This concerned Bakula Rinpoche, who was worried that young people, who had very little knowledge about Buddhism, might misinterpret Dalai Lama's message. Therefore he expressed these issues to Dalai Lama asking him to speak more about Buddhism (Wangchuk, 2008: 76-77).

81 Few of the foreign missionaries I spoke to admitted that some of the missionaries in the early 1990s might have used rather aggressive methods of proselytizing, up to the point of encouraging converts to destroy Buddhist

the Mongolian people about their Buddhist heritage so that they would be able to reply to these accusations.⁸² FPMT is one of the numerous religious associations or centers, which organize Buddhist talks, readings and ceremonies with the aim of providing basic religious education for lay people, who are very eager to learn more about Buddhism.⁸³ Besides teaching Buddhism, FPMT offers free English classes. The center also houses a café which is popular with young people, because of its free wireless internet access.

Another exile Tibetan, Panchen Otrul Rinpoche first visited Mongolia in 1995 with the Dalai Lama and since then has been coming every summer to teach lay believers in simple language. Panchen Otrul thinks that Buddhists have a lot to learn from Christians when it comes to engagement in humanitarian work⁸⁴ and after experiencing the poverty of the Mongolian people, he established Asral NGO in 2001. At the same time Panchen Otrul Rinpoche also started Gunchab Jampa Ling, a religious non-profit organization teaching Buddhism to lay people.⁸⁵ All activities are coordinated from a central building located on the edge of one of the *ger* districts of Ulaanbaatar. The center's resident director is a senior Tibetan monk, Geshe Lhawang Gyaltzen. Asral NGO concentrates on helping families. One of its initiatives is a thirty-five day sewing and handicrafts training for women. In time of my fieldwork 200 women had already



finished the course. To help fund the NGO and provide employment for some of the women, a felt project called Made in Mongolia (MIM) was initiated. The handmade felt products are sold in Mongolia and abroad (photography). The NGO also offers daycare for children and math (English in the summertime) classes for high-school students. In addition the

sacred objects and home altars. For example Markus Dubach acknowledged that such episodes took place. At the same time he stressed that they were minority incidents and wholeheartedly condemned such behaviors (interview, 27.05.2009).

82 Interview with Thubten Gyatso, 07.05.2009.

83 Majer and Teleki, 2006, *Survey of Active Buddhist Temples in Ulaanbaatar in 2005 – 2006, with some annotations in 2007*, available at <http://mongoliantemples.net>, as accessed 05.02.2011.

84 Havnevik (manuscript). The employees of Asral NGO stressed that compassion and caring for others are parts of Buddhism, that were lost during communism and it is important to teach people about them (interview, 18.05.2009).

85 Asral NGO's website, www.asralmongolia.org, as accessed 15.05.2011.

center runs projects in Gachuurt, close to Ulaanbaatar, in Ondershil in the Gobi region and in Shankh in central Mongolia.⁸⁶

The ninth Jibzundamba Khutugtu was born in Lhasa, Tibet, and recognized at the age of four. At the request of Mongolian president Ochirbat his identity was revealed in 1991. He has lived for many years in Dharamsala with the Dalai Lama. He visited Mongolia unofficially in 1999 on a tourist visa. Due to his strong connection to the Tibetan exile government and the Dalai Lama, the visit met with strong opposition from the Chinese government. In order to avoid additional strains on the relationship with the powerful neighbor, the ties were not further developed (Bareja-Starzyńska and Havnevik, 2006: 224) until the autumn of 2009 when he spent one month in Ulaanbaatar. In the summer of 2010 president Elbegdorj⁸⁷ granted Jibzundamba Mongolian citizenship. Following this, he spent two months in Mongolia.⁸⁸

Religion and monastic education are being re-organized all around Mongolia. According to the International Religious Freedom Report in 2010 there were 254 Buddhist places of worship registered in the country.⁸⁹ Young boys wearing monk robes are a common sight now. There are also several temples for Buddhist women, although only very few of the women have taken novice vows. The majority of women performing temple rituals adopt a “semi-monastic” status; some are married and have children, long hair and wear make-up. They do not wear the Tibetan style religious robes, as do the women ordained as novices, most of whom have been ordained by high Tibetan religious masters (Bareja-Starzyńska and Havnevik, 2006: 227).

Mongolian “monks” are referred to as *lam*, the Mongolian phonetic form of the Tibetan *lama* (Tib. *bla ma*), which means ‘teacher,’ which again is the Tibetan word for Sanskrit *guru*. In Mongolia *lam*, and not a phonetic transcription of the Tibetan *drapa* (*grwa pa*), is generally used as the word for ‘monk,’ thereby blurring the Tibetan distinctions between a ‘teacher’ (*bla ma*) who is not necessarily celibate and a ‘monk’ who is obliged by vows to be celibate. Mongolian *lam* do not necessarily observe the vow of celibacy as it is prescribed in the Vinaya (monastic discipline). Many Mongolian *lam* have a wife or a girlfriend, and it is often considered by

86 Interview with Mungun, Baaska and Otgoo, 18.05.2009.

87 In 2009 presidential election, Elbegdorj, representing the Democratic Party, won over Enkhbayar from MPRP. Enkhbayar, the former president, was clearly supportive of Buddhism, and he and his Buddhist wife often appeared at official Buddhist events. My impression was that many Christians voted for Elbegdorj and hoped that he would create a more positive environment for Christianity in Mongolia.

88 Mongolia-Web, 2010, <http://www.mongolia-web.com/general-news/2849-ninth-bogd-gets-mongolian-citizenship>, as accessed 15.04.2009.

89 U.S. Department of State (2010) Mongolia.

Mongols a distinctly Mongolian way (ibid: 221). According to the Buddhist Vinaya, however, the rule of celibacy cannot be compromised, and Tibetan monks do not accept the Mongolian interpretation of the monastic rules. They say the married Mongolian clerics are not proper monks and should not wear the robes of the Sangha. On several occasions the Dalai Lama has condemned the Mongolian practice of married “monks”.⁹⁰

During Bakula Rinpoche’s first years in Mongolia, he attended ceremonies for monks at the Gandan monastery. Many of the participating “monks” were married, which bothered Rinpoche, who himself was a fully ordained monk and a ‘doctor of philosophy’ (Tib. *dge bshes*).⁹¹ He would ask them not to come as he felt they were not really monks, since after the ceremony they would go home to their wives. Despite this, they kept coming, so Bakula Rinpoche decided to build his own monastery, where the celibacy vows would be enforced. Pethub monastery was opened in 1999, and has today about thirty resident monks.⁹² However, thinking in such terms would mean that up to eighty percent of the clerics in the Mongolian monasteries are not monks according to the Buddhist canonical monastic rules.⁹³

The issue is more complex than it might seem at first as it is based in both Mongolia’s history and present situation. In the past, most Mongolian *lam* took monastic vows (either as novices or as fully ordained monks), and many undertook rigorous training in Mongolian monasteries or abroad in Tibet. A non-estimated number took up to twenty years of training, sometimes more, in Gomang College in Drepung Monastery in Lhasa and became highly recognized bilingual scholars producing important works in religious philosophy as well as in other fields.⁹⁴ It was, however, also the case that men (the numbers are unknown) took monastic vows, and after spending some time in a monastery, left to stay with their family, participating in secular responsibilities and herding animals, while remaining a “monk” and visiting a monastery regularly. Also the political history of Mongolia cannot be underestimated as a factor, since following a law from 1934, monks were encouraged to break their vows and marry (Bareja-Starzyńska and Havnevik, 2006: 220).

Although some monks kept their vows pure, but in a concealed manner living in “pro-forma marriages” all through the communist time, the majority became “lay-monks,” i.e. they

90 Havnevik, oral information, 02.05.2011.

91 Ibid.

92 Interview with Thubten Gyatso, 07.05.2009, see also Bareja-Starzyńska and Havnevik (2006).

93 Majer and Teleki (2006).

94 Havnevik, oral information, 09.05.2011; Havnevik (manuscript).

married or co-habited with women.⁹⁵ Thus the majority of the old monks, who put their robes back on in 1990, and who have been the driving force of the revival, have families. In the current situation the monasteries do not have the capacity to provide housing for all the clerics, thus the majority of them live with their families, surrounded by the temptations of an everyday life, only to visit the monastery in the daytime in order to perform temple services. Moreover, due to the economic crisis, becoming a “monk” may be tempting as it provides a modest income. Thus, although devotion is a main cause for many for joining a monastery, for some it may also be a way out of unemployment and poverty (Bareja-Starzyńska and Havnevik, 2006: 221).⁹⁶

Another obstacle Buddhism faces is the fact that many young Mongolians find the religion difficult to approach and identify with. It is argued that the clerical language, which is Tibetan, makes it difficult for people to understand the Buddhist texts and to improve their knowledge and understanding of Buddhism. Since the eighteenth century the religious language of the Mongols was Tibetan, even though the complete Tibetan Buddhist canon was translated into Mongolian. Today Tibetan is still the language used in monasteries to recite prayers and texts. Moreover, part of the Mongolian Buddhist scholarship on philosophy, art, medicine and other Buddhist subjects that was written in Mongolian, was written in the traditional vertical script, replaced in 1944 by Cyrillic, and today inaccessible to most Mongolians. The question of translation from Tibetan into vernacular Mongolian is a complex matter debated since the revival of Buddhism started in the early 1990s. A number of prayers and ritual texts have been translated into modern Mongolian (Bareja-Starzyńska and Havnevik, 2006: 229). The issue is complex, and related to processes of religious change and adaptation. In the context of a modern, pluralist Mongolian society Buddhists meet new challenges, where segments of the clergy advocate change and adaptation while others are more conservative.

Bakula Rinpoche was one of the Buddhist masters who first initiated the translation of Buddhist prayers into Mongolian.⁹⁷ Organizations such as FPMT and the Asral NGO represent a form of Buddhism influenced by Western thought and modernization processes.⁹⁸ Both these organizations devote a lot of time and effort to making Buddhism more accessible through translation of Buddhist texts and books about Buddhism into contemporary Mongolian. At the

95 Havnevik, oral information, 09.05.2011, see also Bareja-Starzyńska and Havnevik (2006).

96 See also Majer and Teleki, (2006).

97 Havnevik (manuscript).

98 Ibid. For analysis of Buddhism in the West see Prebish and Baumann (eds) (2002).

same time Christian missionaries and Mongolian Christians openly criticize the use of Tibetan in Buddhist prayers and contrast this to the use of vernacular Mongolian in all aspects of Christianity, especially the translation of the Bible.⁹⁹ Moreover, they suggest that Christianity influences Buddhism. For example pastors Dashdendev and Purevdorj think that the presence of other religions, and mainly Christianity, makes people question Buddhism, which was not possible earlier, when Buddhism was the only religion and monks had a lot of power.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Purevdorj believes that the competition from Christianity forces Buddhists to change and adopt new ways (such as translation of popular prayers and ritual texts and publishing books about Buddhism for lay people).¹⁰¹

Shamanism

Also a form of pre-Buddhist Mongolian beliefs has revived, or been recreated, in the past two decades. However, the post-socialist revival is not simply a reconstruction of an old tradition, but in many aspects a hybrid reconciling fragments of old practices with new reinventions. While Mongolian pre-Buddhist religion is rooted in a nomadic lifestyle, and among the Buryats and Dakhads it has revived in what is said to be a more traditional form, in the urban environment it is increasingly practiced in new ways and in new contexts. The modern post-socialist Shamanism appears to be dynamic and flexible and able to respond to new life conditions and needs (Schlehe, 2005: 284). Judith Hangartner, during her research of the reemerging Darkhad Shamanism, discovered that the majority of the present-day Darkhad shamans are men who started shamanizing after 1990, and the interest in becoming a Shaman seems to increase (Hangartner, 2006: 111). Since the mid-nineties, several Shamanic centers have opened in Ulaanbaatar. These centers are visited by people consulting shamans with the hope of solving their everyday problems.

This flexibility of Shamanism allows it to exist within several distinctive contexts. First of all, the modern Shamanism is being reinvented in a response to the needs of people in present-

99 For example Pastor Tsolmonbaatar said that when he was studying to become a Buddhist monk in the 1990s, he was just told to memorize the Tibetan texts without understanding them, but when he went to a Christian church he discovered that the Bible was in Mongolian and everything was clearly explained (interview, 17.05.2009). In 2009 over 500 books about Christianity had already been published in Mongolian, only by evangelicals (only five of them were written in Mongolia, the rest was translated) (interview with Purev-Erdene and Gertrude Dubach, 25.05.2009). The issues associated with translation of the Bible into Mongolian are dealt with in chapter five.

100 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009 and Pastor Dashdendev, 29.05.2009.

101 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009.

day Mongolia in their attempt to adapt to modern, capitalist, urban life conditions. One example of these changes is the contemporary worship at Eej Khad (meaning ‘Mother Rock’) – a widely popular granite rock in central Mongolia that worshippers believe has the power to fulfill their dreams. The site’s popularity increased dramatically after 1990, when all restraints on public worship were removed. Every day hundreds of pilgrims come to the rock in hope to get their practical material wishes fulfilled. They bring offerings of biscuits, milk and rice, money or even vodka, and walk around it three-times clockwise. Some ask for wealth or love, or a bright future for their children. Most people have little idea about the sacred stone’s origin and now both Buddhist monks and shamans place their claims on Eej Khad. For the worshippers whether the site is Buddhist or Shamanist is a non-issue, it is believed that anyone can come and ask for help, and Eej Khad will help everyone, regardless of their religion. People from across Mongolia travel to the monument and ask for their wishes to come true (Gohen, 2007: 27-28; Schlehe, 2005: 285-286).

Secondly Shamanism is revived as the ancient traditional Mongolian religion, closely connected with the cult of Chinggis Khan¹⁰² and the resurgence of nationalistic pride, as well as the construction of the new Mongolian identity.¹⁰³ Mátyás Balogh, in his research of contemporary Mongolian Shamanism, arrived at a conclusion that even though Buddhism is still the dominant religion in Mongolia, the significance and popularity of Shamanism is gradually increasing:

“The fact that Mongolians often think of Shamanism as their primeval religion, the core of the Mongolian way of thinking, and the essence of nomadism and Mongolness, makes Shamanism provoke the attention of an increasingly wider public. Primarily it is the ancientness of Shamanism that makes people think that it is more indigenous to Mongols than Buddhism” (Balogh, 2010: 238).

And finally, the modern Shamanism in Mongolia is directly responding to the New Age interested Western tourists attracted to the romantic idea of the unspoiled steppe and longing for the ultimate and pure connection with nature. Shamanism has been stimulating the Western imagination for decades. Nowadays the cultures of Central Asia, in particular Mongolia and the

¹⁰² For analysis of Shamanic uses of the cult of Chinggis Khan, see Merli (2004).

¹⁰³ For some of the unaffiliated Mongolians I talked to, Buddhism and Christianity are foreign, imported religions, while Shamanism represents the “real Mongolness”.

Mongolian Republics in the Russian Federation receive attention from New Agers.¹⁰⁴ When Judith Schlehe conducted research on the connection between Shamanism and tourism in Mongolia, she discovered that the shamanist revival is not only a reconstruction of old traditions, but also an invention and blending of traditions, in a pragmatic attempt to earn money on Western spiritual interest in Eastern cultures. Schlehe's examples include a nature festival organized solely for the benefit of tourists and unknown to Mongolians, as well as a family of a Tsaatan¹⁰⁵ shaman that spends summer in a short distance from a tourist camp instead of following their custom of moving to the high mountains with the rest of their group (Schlehe, 2005: 286-293).

Concluding remarks

The transformations in the last two decades in Mongolia have shown how dynamic the category of 'religion' is and how misleading it is to speak about 'religions' as if they were fixed and unchanging entities. The political transition has made the revival of Buddhism and Shamanism possible, but the revival is more than just a return of these two traditions to the public sphere. As the religious actors respond to the new conditions of globalization and competition with Christianity, the traditions they represent change and adapt.

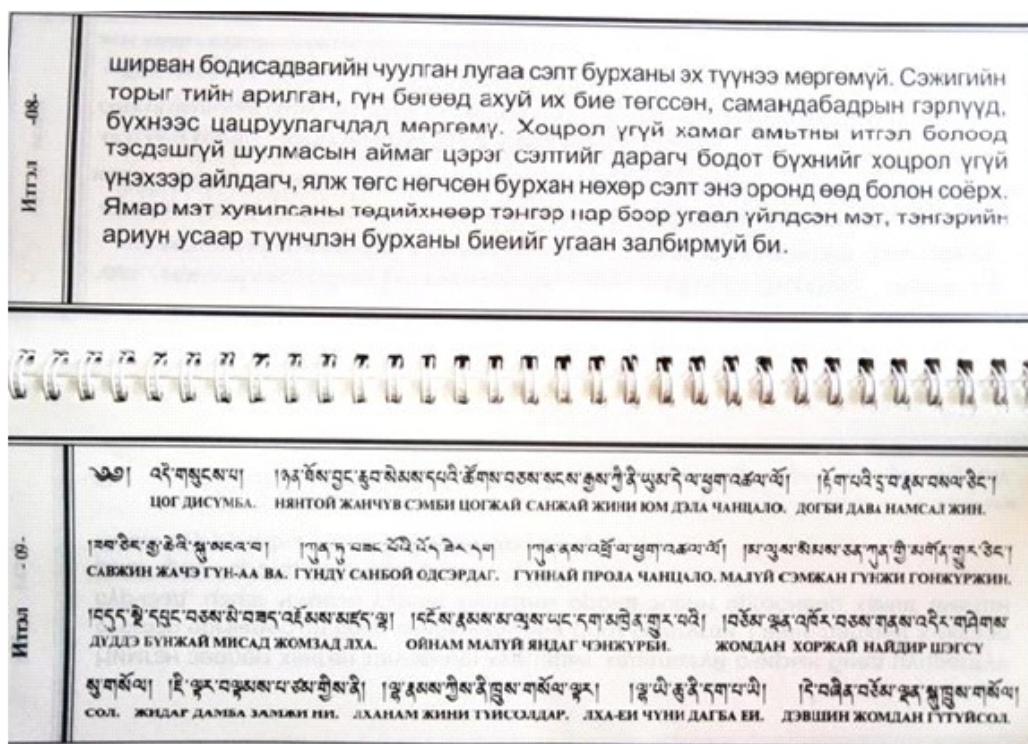
At the same time I believe that the specific religious context needs to be taken into account when trying to understand the growth of Christianity in Mongolia after 1990. First of all, due to the atheist propaganda and devastation of Buddhism by the communists, generations of Mongolians had been alienated from their religion. The knowledge of Buddhist scriptures, liturgy and rituals was scarce. At the same time, left suddenly without Soviet assistance, Mongolia was faced with a severe social and financial crisis, which made the revival of Buddhism more difficult. Christian missionaries admit that, due to these factors, they possibly faced less resistance than they might have otherwise.¹⁰⁶ Secondly, from a missionary strategy perspective, Mongolia was a clean slate in 1990, and a great opportunity. Christians, who arrived

104 For example see Per Inge Oestmoen's website www.coldsiberia.org: "the Shamanistic traditions of the Mongols may show us the way to something important for us. What our civilization has mistakenly interpreted as the <primitiveness> and <barbarism> of the Mongols are expressions of the great ability of this people to live not against Nature, but in cooperation with it. Due to an over-emphasis on the rational mind, our civilization has to a considerable extent lost this precious ability, and we have to regain it."

105 A Turkic speaking ethnic minority in north-west Mongolia, known for being close to extinction and for their shamans. They are believed to practice the essence of Shamanism and their shamans are regarded by Mongolians as the most powerful (Balogh, 2010: 231).

106 Interview with Pastor Dashdende, 29.05.2009, Dee Allen Andersen, 13.05.2009, and Father James, 18.05.2009.

in the early 1990s, were keen to evangelize Mongolia as quickly and effectively as possible (Kemp, 2000: 506). The next chapter follows the development of Christianity in Mongolia from the arrival of the first missionaries in the early 1990s to the present functioning and organization.



Buddhist prayer book translated from Tibetan into Mongolian by monk Purevsukh from Asral NGO. On the top page is the Mongolian translation of the text. On the bottom page is the original Tibetan text and transliteration of the Tibetan to Mongolian for chanting.

Chapter 4

Christianity in Mongolia after 1990

“Before 1990 there was no [Western] Christianity here. See how it flourished in Mongolia. How could Mongolians embrace Christianity so easily? How can it be growing so fast?”¹⁰⁷ These short sentences, articulated by Pastor Purevdorj, arguably one of the most important personalities within Mongolian evangelical Christianity, convey quite accurately the purpose of this chapter - to give a bird’s eye perspective on development and functioning of the main Christian denominations present in Mongolia and hopefully come a few steps closer to understanding the phenomenon of the birth and growth of Christianity in Mongolia after 1990.

According to the International Religious Freedom Report about ninety percent of Mongolian Christians are Protestant, nine percent are Mormon and one percent is made up of the remaining denominations, most notably the Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church.¹⁰⁸ Nearly all Protestant churches are evangelical in character (characterized by Biblical orthodoxy, rigorous morality and an ecstatic form of worship). Since they represent an overwhelming majority of Mongolian Christians, it is only natural to devote the lion’s share of the chapter to the activities of evangelical Protestants.

Moreover, religious identity is far from static in Mongolia, and large numbers of people move out of as well as into the Christian churches, making accurate estimates of membership very difficult. Markus Dubach notes that a process of “church hopping”, when people switch churches and denominations multiple times, has become more prominent, and a survey conducted within the evangelical churches in the early 2000s showed that about forty percent of baptized people remained active Christians after a period of time.¹⁰⁹ At the same time it needs to be stressed that numbers do not measure faith or commitment, and many of the foreign missionaries as well as Mongolian church leaders openly admit that a great majority of Mongolian Christians are merely nominal adherents or practical people motivated by hopes of material advantages.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009.

¹⁰⁸ U.S. Department of State (2010) Mongolia.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Markus Dubach, 27.05.2009.

¹¹⁰ The estimates I was given by the missionaries were very different, from optimistic 50% to pessimistic 10% of church members being sincerely committed.

Evangelical Protestants

The beginnings

One of the most important personalities in the early years of evangelical Protestant proselytizing was John Gibbens, who first went to Mongolia as a student from England in 1972. During this stay he began to work on a New Testament translation. He left after a year, but returned again in 1978. He met a Mongolian woman named Altaa, who would later become his wife and co-translator. In the early 1980s he was expelled, but continued his work, and eventually in 1990, just thirteen days after the first free election, his translation of the New Testament was published, along with the first missionaries entering the country. John Gibbens returned to Mongolia and established Mongolia's first church, Christ Church (Христ сүм), which held its opening service in Ulaanbaatar on September 23 1990, with six believers attending (Hale, 2000: 96-103).

At first the evangelical missionaries from many countries worked together, but quickly disagreements and schisms began. Pastor Dashdendev recalls that the church he joined in April 1991 had already split into two a few months earlier. This new church was called the Fellowship Church (Нөхөрлэл), and it seems that it was in this church that Boldbaatar was appointed as the first Mongolian pastor.¹¹¹ Rick Leatherwood claims to have baptized thirty-four people in a ceremony held in an indoor swimming pools on 28th April 1991, among them a young veterinarian Dashdendev (Leatherwood, 2006: 77). Dashdendev was appointed pastor following his involvement in the protests against the Law on the Relationship of State and Religious Institutions, adopted in 1993. According to him, he was the second native Mongolian pastor.¹¹² He became one of the leaders of the Fellowship Church, which was meeting in a small theater and by August 1991 had grown to more than seventy people (ibid: 79). Both churches eventually broke down into fragments and dissolved. Among the new schismatic churches, Eternal Light (Мөнхийн гэрэл) established in December 1991 is worth mentioning, because it grew quickly and reached seven hundred people during Sunday services in the autumn of 1992. In November 1992 Eternal Light split into two, with Korean missionary Hwang taking over the newly established Everlasting Dawn Church (Үүрдийн гэрээ). It appears that in the first few years of Christian presence in Mongolia new churches were established, not as a result of natural growth and planting daughter churches, but as a result of schism and conflict among the various leaders

¹¹¹ Interview with Pastor Dashdendev, 29.05.2009.

¹¹² Ibid.

(Neeser, 2008: 19-20). The early nineties were characterized by disputes between the different missionaries and churches, and confusion among Mongolians with regard to what Christianity was and what were the differences between all the Christian groups.¹¹³

In the first years, two tools were available for evangelization: John Gibbens' translation of the New Testament, and a film about the life of Jesus produced by Campus Crusade for Christ, called *Jesus*. It is significant that both of them were interdenominational (Kemp, 2000: 506). The film *Jesus* had been used all around the world; in fact Mongolian was the 186th language in which the film was dubbed (Leatherwood, 2006: 64). The premiere was on 11th January 1992, and it was accompanied by concerts by a Christian recording artist Randy Stonehill to help draw the attention of young people. According to Rick Leatherwood, a professional delegation of businessmen had come for the premiere from the USA. They met with their Mongolian counterparts and Mongolian parliament members and invited them to the premiere; as a result many important people attended the opening. In the next years *Jesus* was shown over four thousand times in almost every city, town, and village across the country (ibid: 85-87). Groups of Christians would travel around the country, show the film either in the local cinema, private house or *ger*, preach, sell the Mongolian translation of the New Testament and appeal for conversion. Both the New Testament in Mongolian and the film *Jesus* have, according to Kemp, been instrumental in converting Mongolians (Kemp, 2000: 505).

Another typical method used by the first evangelical missionaries to spread their message was teaching English. Rick Leatherwood recalls how, during his stay in Mongolia in April 1991 with a group of American missionaries, they were invited to teach English in the Mongolian State Teacher's College: "we all looked at one another and in a moment realized this was the platform the Lord was giving us. So off we went without a thought to the fact that there wasn't an English teacher in our group." Leatherwood explains that it seemed that the students were interested in them as much as in learning English. After being cut out for seventy years, Mongolians were very curious about everything from the outside world, and there were not many Americans in Mongolia at that time: "we suddenly found ourselves before a group of people who simply wanted to hear whatever we had to say." Thus they saw it as a golden opportunity to tell the young Mongolians about God, starting from the very beginning: "A is for Adam. Adam was the first man who ever lived on the earth" (Leatherwood, 2006: 72-73).

113 Interview with Paul Kotanko, 01.06.2009.

Furthermore Leatherwood gives credits for the growth of Christianity in Mongolia during the years 1991-1995 to short-term English teachers: “often the students would be invited to a church service in order to hear English spoken by a native speaker. But what was being said in English, was also being translated into Mongolian, and so what the young people ended up hearing in their own language was the story about a man named Jesus” (ibid: 90). For example Davka, a man in his early forties told me that he first started coming to Christian churches in 1993 in order to learn English and meet Americans.¹¹⁴ His story is representative for Mongolian Christianity in the early nineties, also because he was frequently changing between the different churches unaware of any denominational differences.¹¹⁵

In 1994 the number of Christians had reached a couple of thousand, and the average church member was a girl around seventeen, along with many thirteen to sixteen year olds making up much of the congregations (Leatherwood, 2006: 117). The Sunday services were filled with enthusiastic young Mongolians in various stages of involvement with Christianity (Hale, 2000: 92). It seems that for many of them Christianity, modernity, English language and Anglo-American culture were all part of the same package. At the same time they were faced with a deep economic crisis and dire views for the future. John Gibbens, rather bitterly commented on the early 1990s in Mongolia:

“A missionary bandwagon rush came from the West and later from Korea. [...] It was the first time Western currency had flowed plentifully in Mongolia! It was new. Christianity became the rage! It was all about money. It was the religion that had made the West rich! Meeting missionaries was the way to get visas to the West, work, money or even a foreign spouse as that guaranteed a meal ticket for life.”¹¹⁶

In the beginning they would come for the novelty, the entertainment, the music, in the end they would start to believe (Hale, 2000: 92-93). Personal stories of Mongolian Christians suggest that people were often first drawn into the Christian orbit through curiosity about the foreign novelty, and hope for personal benefits, especially by their desire to learn English and meet foreigners, or as Pastor Purevdorj put it: “there was nothing else to do on a Sunday in that time.”¹¹⁷ Eventually

114 This is true not only for the evangelical churches. I have heard similar stories from members of the other denominations. For example Pastor Bold from the Seventh-Day Adventist Church admits to at first going to Christian worship meetings while he was studying to become a Buddhist monk, only in order to practice his English (interview, 02.06.2009). Moreover, this phenomenon is equally widespread now as it was in the early nineties.

115 Personal communication with Davka, 22.05.2009.

116 Gibbens, 2007, *Mongolia: a lesson to learn*, available at <http://www.e-n.org.uk>, as accessed 20.04.2011

117 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009.

they would start to listen to the preaching and find it compelling enough to convert. Some continued their education, becoming employees of the mission as translators, leaders or pastors. The missionaries spoke directly to the young Mongolians who witnessed the collapse of communism, but who were also heavily influenced by its antireligious propaganda and felt disconnection from the Buddhist faith of their grandparents. With the modern media flooding the country with Western images and music, in search for a new identity and meaning, these young people would look outside the borders, often to the West.

According to Markus Dubach, in the first years after the democratic transformation there were two dominant missionary philosophies present in Mongolia. On the one side were the missionaries, who had worked in communist countries and were accustomed to operating in a very secretive way. When they came to Mongolia, they just continued to be very cautious and reserved. On the other there were the young missionaries with no experience with socialism, who treated Mongolia like any other open democratic country. As a result two different approaches to mission developed, which are still evident two decades later. One example of the secretive approach is the English Language Institute (ELI) which came from China and implemented the same methods in Mongolia¹¹⁸; another is the Good Neighbor Society.¹¹⁹

Rick Leatherwood notes that in the mid-1990s, the three biggest churches in UB were: the already mentioned Everlasting Dawn (nondenominational) started in November 1992, Eternal Love (Мөнхийн хайр, Presbyterian) established in October 1994 by another Korean pastor Young Choon Lee, and Hope (Найдвар, Assemblies of God) established in September 1993 by missionaries from Hong Kong (Leatherwood, 2006: 94-95).¹²⁰ According to the Mongolian Evangelical Alliance there were three Evangelical churches in 1990 with a total of about forty believers. By 2002, however, over 170 Evangelical Churches had been established in every corner of the country, with nearly 11,000 believers. It was estimated that the annual growth of Christians was 15.6 percent, which indicates that the church in Mongolia was one of the fastest growing churches in the world.¹²¹

118 When I contacted them, they said they were Christians, but they do not involve in evangelization, they just teach English.

119 Interview with Markus Dubach, 27.05.2009.

120 See also Pillar International booklet, 2004.

121 MEA Materials 1

South Korean missionaries

The South Korean missionary community played a very important role in establishing Christianity in Mongolia. Korean Christians have a deep commitment to evangelism and missionary work. They plant churches, open hospitals and run universities. Today, about fourteen thousand Koreans are on mission outside of Korea,¹²² a figure second only to the United States (Jenkins, 2007: 83). In Mongolia, Koreans are the most numerous group of missionaries. In 2009 there were about 250 Korean pastors in Mongolia, and according to Father James, during a meeting with the government about religious matters, about eighty percent of the Protestant pastors present were Korean.¹²³ Moreover, Korean is one of the most popular foreign languages in Mongolia and the connection between Korean prosperity, the activity of Korean missionaries and the growth of Christianity should not be underestimated.

As I mentioned earlier Mongolian identity lies somewhere between an Asian and Western society. While many Mongolians look towards the West, South Korea is the close, practically neighboring success story and an example Mongolia wishes to follow. There are some parallels between South Korea and Mongolia, both countries have strong national identity, both had their history shaped by their geographical position between powerful neighbors. South Korea used to be very poor and reached a high level of development quickly. The Mongolian word for Korea means 'rainbow', and Mongolians hold Korea in high regard, they look up to it and aspire to repeat the kind of development rate experienced by South Korea.¹²⁴ Christianity is generally perceived as Western, but it is at the same time associated not only with Western, but also with Korean prosperity. According to Paul Kotanko it is Korea that is the number one destination for Mongolians, not America or other Western countries.¹²⁵ Korea undoubtedly occupies a very special position in Mongolian minds. Some argue that within the coming decades Christianity

122 Some sources say that more than 20,000 Korean missionaries are working abroad (e.g.

http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/01/113_56041.html, and

<http://www.diaspora2011us.com/#/diaspora-2011-conference/korean-diaspora> as accessed 20.04.2011).

123 Interview with Father James, 18.05.2009. There are also Koreans among Roman Catholic priests and Seventh-Day Adventist pastors in Mongolia.

124 Interview with Paul Kotanko, 01.06.2009.

125 Ibid.

may achieve in Mongolia the same kind of cultural influence that it has already achieved in South Korea¹²⁶ – not a wholesome conversion, but a permeation of national life and culture.¹²⁷

Denominations

While the Catholic Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the Jehovah's Witnesses and some independent Baptist groups retain very clear denominational identity in Mongolia, most of the evangelical Protestant groups have consciously chosen to downplay their denominational backgrounds and work together. They did not want to impose the foreign divisions on the young Mongolian church, so they try to present the evangelical version of Christianity as united. Even when there were some theological disagreements and churches split, the missionaries managed to keep up the appearance of a cohesive evangelical Christianity.¹²⁸

They all agreed that the emphasis should be on conservative Biblicism, cell group structure, prayer meetings, educating people in Sunday schools, lay leadership training, social services, such as collecting rice and clothing and maintaining orphanages, kindergartens, and above all establishing goals as a strategy to encourage growth. While many of the churches have denominational names, the name depends on which missionary agency planted the church and this does not have any practical ramifications for the members. It means that for example a Lutheran church is only 'Lutheran' in name, because it was started with a backing of the Norwegian Lutheran Mission. In reality the emphasis and the Sunday service in all churches are similar, and most Mongolians have no connection to the denominational name.¹²⁹ The united front of evangelical Christians made is possible for organizations such as United Bible Theological College (UBTC), Mongolian Evangelical Alliance (MEA), Joint Christian Services (JCS) and Theological Education by Extension (TEE)¹³⁰ to come into existence.

126 The number of Christians in South Korea is estimated to be around fourteen million, about thirty percent of the population. There are twice as many Protestants as Catholics. Christians represent the majority of those declaring any religious affiliation, they also have the highest service and ritual attendance (U.S. Department of State, 2010, Republic of Korea)

127 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009 and with Pastor Dashdendev, 29.05.2009.

128 It seems that they were quite successful in that. For example Pastor Egi from the Rich Heart Baptist Church told me that, even though he was going to Mongolian church already in 1994, he first discovered that there are different denominations when he travelled to United States in 1997 (interview, 20.05.2009). A young Christian engineer told me that the difference between his church (Pentecostal) and the church his wife used to go to (independent Baptist) was in the atmosphere and the type of music played during service.

129 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009.

130 TEE prepares (translates and adapts to local context) inter-denominational Bible study materials in Mongolian. Their courses are well structured and consist of several levels of increasing difficulty. They are meant to be used in churches' own Bible study classes (interview with Graham Aylett, 25.05.2009).

In the recent years, however, the denominational preferences have started to be more important. Some churches leave the united front and move towards a more separatist approach. Pastor Dashdendev sees two kinds of development in Mongolia. On the one hand some churches choose to separate and take the denominational route, while others are coming closer together under the slogan “united in diversity”. According to Dashdendev particularly one branch of Korean Presbyterians tries to separate right now. He suspects that the reason may be money, but the explanations given by the divisive churches usually stress dogmatic and theological differences and “God’s calling”. Dashdendev thinks that missionaries should not import the divisions from home to Mongolia.¹³¹

Markus Dubach, who has been in Mongolia since the early 1990s and has witnessed the development of Christianity from the beginning, admits that “it was just a matter of time before the excitement of the introduction of Christianity subsided and denominations started to come”.¹³² He suspects that the reason is funding. Majority of Mongolian churches have affiliations abroad, which usually means that there is flow of money into the mission station. The sponsoring churches abroad usually have clear denominational identity and want to make sure that their money goes into their denomination. Baptists support Baptists, Presbyterians support Presbyterians, Assemblies of God support Assemblies of God and so forth. The fundraising follows the denominational lines. Today in Mongolia groups that would never even sit in one meeting in the sending country, are still able to cooperate and agree on a common policy, but the denominational differences are starting to gain importance.¹³³ According to Dashdendev, the divisions are minor now, but this, he believes, will change in the next generation, and in the future it will be more difficult for Mongolian Christians to cooperate. He would like the missionaries that are importing the divisions to leave: “Mongolians are so few, why do we need 100 denominations?” Mongolian pastors are generally against imposition of the foreign denominational divisions.¹³⁴

As the number of evangelical Christians started to grow, the missionaries and church leaders felt a need for cooperation and organization to exchange information and provide mutual support. In 1996 a number of leaders of Mongolian churches came together and decided to form an informal fellowship to help and encourage each other in their evangelization effort. In 1997

¹³¹ Interview with Pastor Dashdendev, 29.05.2009.

¹³² Interview with Markus Dubach, 27.05.2009.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Interview with Pastor Dashdendev, 29.05.2009.

the fellowship was extended and formed into Mongolian Evangelical Fellowship, with thirty-two registered and non-registered member churches, and in December 1999 the Mongolian Evangelical Fellowship was registered with the government as a membership-based non-governmental organization. By February 2002, when the name was changed to Mongolian Evangelical Alliance (MEA), the membership had grown to over 170 churches and organizations.

MEA is an umbrella organization for the evangelical churches in Mongolia and a member of the World Evangelical Alliance.¹³⁵ According to former secretary of MEA, Dashdendev, in 2009 more than 250 churches and 130 pastors were members in MEA. Every two to three years MEA organizes the National Church Assembly for leaders from across Mongolia, and at the meeting in 2008 there were 460 groups present. The purpose of MEA is to unite churches with similar convictions and to encourage cooperation between churches. Finally, the purpose of MEA is to set goals for the future of the evangelical Christianity in Mongolia.

The urge to evangelize is the main distinguishing point between evangelical Protestants and mainstream Protestants. Evangelicals firmly believe that the Holy Spirit transforms every believer into a fervent and convincing evangelist under an irresistible compulsion to spread the good news of the gospel. The new members, mobilized in evangelistic outreach efforts, are very enthusiastic about witnessing to others about their faith.¹³⁶ They are taught that they do not need special theological education nor be a Christian for long to be an effective missionary¹³⁷ or to see the power of God working through their lives. It is sufficient to accept Christ as savior and to be filled with the Holy Spirit through baptism (Palmer, 1974: 72-73), which often takes place just a few weeks after joining the church.¹³⁸ Right now the main goal of MEA is the “20/10” movement. The objective is to reach ten percent Christians in Mongolia by 2020.¹³⁹ In order to reach the goal, the Strategy Committee of MEA developed a plan for outreach, which emphasizes specific efforts directed at women, elderly people, fathers and most of all children, who will be teenagers and young adults in 2020.¹⁴⁰

135 MEA materials 1

136 To a point where sometimes conducting interviews became difficult or impossible.

137 For example a young female student told me that right after she became Christian, she started inviting her classmates to come to church, even though she didn't know much about Bible or theology. She felt compelled to tell her friends about Jesus and invite them to join.

138 This approach is markedly different from the tactic employed by the Catholic and Orthodox missionaries, which includes two years of catechism classes in preparation for baptism.

139 Interview with Pastor Dashdendev, 29.05.2009.

140 MEA materials 2

Churches, education and national leadership training

Theological education and leadership training is a major need for the Mongolian evangelical churches. Pastor Dashdendev sees the lack of leaders¹⁴¹ as one of the reasons why the growth of Christianity has slowed down.¹⁴² The churches stress the importance of building national church leadership, so that Christianity is not solely associated with foreigners and perceived as a foreign imported religion. The majority of churches organize Bible study for their members, in the form of Sunday schools and cell group meetings for Bible reading, discussion, and prayer.

In order to paint a more thorough picture of evangelical Christianity in Mongolia, in the following paragraphs I will explain the organization and functioning of a typical evangelical church in Mongolia. The church I have chosen to use as an example, the Living Word Christian Church (LWCC), while significantly larger than an average church in Mongolia, has many characteristics of a typical Mongolian church. It was started with help of foreign missionaries, but now has solely Mongolian leadership, it is financed from abroad, it stresses missionary outreach with in-church training of missionaries, the members are organized in cell groups and focus is on the Sunday worship.

LWCC was started by Mongolians with help from American missionary groups associated with the River of Life Christian Church and the Bread of Life organization. The first



meeting was held in 1998, with five members in a small rented room. Now the church, with its more than 1500 members and five daughter churches around the country, is one of the largest in Mongolia.¹⁴³ It is located in a renovated cinema building (photography) in the center of Ulaanbaatar, close to Gandan monastery. The building is big, clean, and bright, with little telling that it is not a

cinema anymore, besides the sign outside. Inside there is a small bookshop where one can buy an

141 According to Gertrude Dubach, the lack of qualified leaders is one of the reasons why many evangelical churches in Mongolia have female pastors or leaders, in particular in the countryside. Although the senior leaders and pastors are almost always men, women have rather strong position in evangelical Christianity in Mongolia (interview, 25.05.2009).

142 Interview with Pastor Dashdendev, 29.05.2009.

143 Interview with Pastor Tsolmonbaatar, 17.05.2009.

assortment of things, including a handy Bible-case and albums with Christian music performed by the church's own rock group. Every Sunday there are four worship services (photography), each with over 200 people attending. In the entrance envelopes for donations are handed out to everybody. The service is filled with energy and live rock music. The song texts are displayed on a big screen so that everybody can join.



People sing, clap and raise hands in loud prayer. The central part of the service is a sermon delivered by a charismatic pastor, who gestures vividly and paces back and forth on the stage. In the end the envelopes with donations are collected.

When new people come to the service, they are invited to participate in a “nucleus training”, a four week introductory program. After completing the four week training, there is a two to three day retreat in the countryside, where the new members are baptized. This is followed by eight weeks of weekly classes in the church. After the training is completed the new members are assigned to cell groups. Cell groups meet once a week to pray, talk, read the Bible, worship, share their problems and doubts and socialize with each other.¹⁴⁴ The cell group leader attends meetings for further leadership training. When a cell group reaches fifteen to twenty members it is split into two and a new leader is appointed.¹⁴⁵

LWCC has its own Bible school in the church. The River of Life Ministry School has a two year fulltime ministry program, which is meant to equip the students with tools needed to be missionaries. The missionary work of the church is based on a strategy where small churches in Ulaanbaatar or in the countryside are approached and help is offered to them. If a graduate of the River of Life Ministry School aspires to become a pastor, he or she needs four more years of

¹⁴⁴ The emotional bond between the members is an important component of the cell group approach, and the relationships may resemble family structures. The leaders become “parents” and their leaders “grandparents”, the members become “children” to the leaders and “siblings” to each other. The “parents” contact their “children” frequently outside of the meetings through for example text messages. Some churches apply gender division: “daughters” are assigned to “mothers” and “sons” are assigned to “fathers” (personal communication with Marla, Barkhuu and Saruul, 14.05.2009).

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Pastor Tsolmonbaatar, 17.05.2009.

education in the Union Bible Theological College. The church is financed from members' offerings and tithe, while the missionary activities are supported by the American River of Life Christian Church. LWCC is a registered church and according to Pastor Tsolmonbaatar there have been no problems with registration, except for one year when their application was denied at first, but after all of the paperwork had been carefully audited, the registration was granted. Tsolmonbaatar thinks that registration may be a bit easier for strictly Mongolian churches, with no foreigners as the immediate leaders. Other activities of the church include Sunday school for children, youth worship, prison ministry and a twelve step program for people who are addicted to alcohol and drugs.¹⁴⁶

The first attempt at a common Bible school for the different evangelical groups was the Ulaanbaatar Bible School (UBBS), initiated in April 1992 by Daniel Lam. It offered two-week training sessions on a bi-monthly basis. In 1995 UBBS was incorporated into the newly established Union Bible Training Centre (UBTC), which offered full-time Bible education. The board included American, Korean and English missionaries. Since 2003 all of UBTC programs are accredited by the Asian Theological Association (ATA), an organization of over 300 theological schools throughout Asia. In 2007 the English name of UBTC was changed to Union Bible Theological College. The school offers a certificate level study (basic biblical understanding), three bachelor programs (Bachelor of Theology, Bachelor of Ministry and Bachelor of Arts in Social Work Studies). In 2008, the first Master of Divinity students were enrolled. The college also offers a two-year part-time program for countryside students with two five-week gatherings a year.¹⁴⁷ Around seventy percent of all new church leaders in Mongolia graduate from UBTC, making it the key Christian educational institution in the country.¹⁴⁸

There are over 150 fulltime, part-time and evening students enrolled in the school, slightly more girls than boys. They come from more than fifty churches. UBTC is evangelical and interdenominational. The teachers are both Mongolian and foreign. Tuition covers twenty-five percent of the school's expenses. The rest comes from donations from Christian organizations abroad. In 2009 the tuition was 500,000 Tugrik¹⁴⁹ per year, a sum unobtainable for the average student. Almost all the students receive a scholarship. The majority of the students

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Pastor Tsolmonbaatar, 17.05.2009.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009; UBTC, www.ubtc.edu.mn, as accessed 24.04.2009.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Kai Ove Berg, 07.05.2009.

¹⁴⁹ About 400 U.S. dollars according to exchange rate from 03.06.2011. In 2009 500,000 Tugrik equaled about 350 USD.

(about eighty percent) receive tuition scholarships from their church or a Christian development organization. The school also has several scholarship programs, which to some extent cover about half of the fulltime students, these include tuition, dormitory expenses and the lunch program. Entry requirements include a high school diploma with good results, a Bible knowledge test and an interview, as well as several letters of recommendation from pastors and church leaders. According to the director, Purevdorj, UBTC prefers to enroll older students instead of fresh high school graduates, due to the level of maturity required for spiritual, philosophical, and theological studies.¹⁵⁰

Christian community

Since democratization started, every year thousands of young people move alone from the countryside to Ulaanbaatar to study. With family and friends left many kilometers away, it is easy to feel lonely and overwhelmed by the big city. For some of these young people the church can offer a sense of fellowship and create a protective network based on friendship. The Fellowship of Christian Students (FCS),¹⁵¹ the Mongolian branch of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), is one of the organizations specializing in reaching out to students. FCS is active in three universities: the Mongolian National University, the Mongolian University of Science and Technology and Ulaanbaatar University.¹⁵² The organization arranges social gatherings such as Korean language camp, picnic and coffee meetings, where the students are invited to Bible study. The main idea is that members invite their friends, who in turn invite their friends. However, due to students leaving Christianity after finishing studies, FCS has commenced an alumni program which is meant to follow up the graduates.¹⁵³

David Martin, in his analysis of evangelicals in Latin America, discovered correlation between the growth of evangelical Protestantism and the movement of people from countryside to the city. The converts are absorbed within a protective social space where they acquire new concepts of self and new modes of initiative. Within the enclosed community, fellowship provides for release, for mutuality and warmth (Martin, 1990: 284). The young Mongolian

150 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009.

151 On the brochure they give to students FCS stands for Fellowship of Campus Students.

152 Ulaanbaatar University is one of the three universities in Ulaanbaatar founded by Korean Christians, the other two are the Mongolian International University and Tushig University. UB University is open to everybody, but because many Christians choose it, it has a high percent of Christian students. According to Dashdendev about a quarter of the students are Christian and an additional five percent convert to Christianity in the course of their studies (interview with Pastor Dashdendev, 29.05.2009).

153 Interview with Sophia and Chimka, 08.05.2009.

Christians I spoke to often stressed “friendship, peace and love” received in the group as important factors in their choice to become Christian. For example a recent university graduate, a girl in her mid-twenties, Chimka, told me that after she moved to Ulaanbaatar from the countryside to study she felt lonely, but when she came to FCS she felt “surrounded with love”.¹⁵⁴ Chimka said that Christianity seemed very different from Buddhism and when she learned that God was the reason for the love she had received in the group, she decided to accept Christianity.¹⁵⁵ A young engineer, Saruul, converted to Christianity after she started dating a Christian boy. She said that earlier she worried a lot, but after she became Christian, she does not worry anymore, she is calmer and more accepting, believing that God has a plan and will take care of her. Saruul also stressed that after conversion she gained a community of friends, which was closer and more “real” than her non-Christian friends.¹⁵⁶ A young man, in his early thirties,¹⁵⁷ told me that when he was a teenager he was very depressed and considered suicide. His father was a violent alcoholic, often beating the other family members. The man felt lonely and as if nobody cared about him. When his friend introduced him to Christianity, the man found inner peace. “Even though my mother and father didn’t care, God cared. I was so desperate, but I felt God’s love,” he said.

Thubten Gyatso has spent some years teaching Buddhism to lay Mongolians in the FPMT center as well as writing articles about Buddhism to the *Mongol Messenger* – a Christian led English language newspaper published in Ulaanbaatar.¹⁵⁸ He admits that there is a big difference between Buddhist and Christian teachings when it comes to the understanding of self. In Buddhism the cause of pain and suffering, and one can only save oneself from it; there is no external salvation by the power of an omnipotent God.¹⁵⁹ An important characteristic of the Christian, and in particular the evangelical churches, is the belief that God intervenes directly in everyday life, giving spiritual blessing, material gain and physical health to his followers. However, it does not end with promises as the believer’s life is often transformed through

¹⁵⁴ Some young members of the All Nations church go out on Fridays to “spread love.” For example they go to hospital’s waiting room or another public place. There find somebody who is sad or in trouble and they pray. The purpose is not direct evangelization, but showing care and love. They only talk about Christianity if people ask (interview with Rob and Bridget Forbes, 31.05.2009).

¹⁵⁵ Interview with Chimka, 08.05.2009.

¹⁵⁶ Personal communication with Saruul, 14.05.2009.

¹⁵⁷ The man asked to remain anonymous due to personal character of the story.

¹⁵⁸ The articles explained Buddhist teachings in simple language and became very popular. Therefore, they were published as a book, which was distributed free of charge.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Thubten Gyatso, 07.05.2009.

conversion. A new faith is able to inspire new discipline, rearrange priorities, and counter the self-destructive behavior (such as alcoholism), and thus becoming a Christian has a positive, tangible impact on believer's life (Jenkins, 2007: 91).

Media

Modernization and globalization change mission, and modern missionaries are global actors more than ever. More often than not they have access to impressive transnational networks and make maximum use of modern forms of communication, the techniques of management and marketing, and the emergence of English as a universal language (Davie, 2007: 207). For example, the English version of the website of the Living Word Christian Church, states: "We live in information technology era where information flows through advanced technologies like internet, TV, or radio etc. Therefore, 'Living Word' church strives to develop all branches of IT, in order to reach our mission to make all Mongolians Christ's disciples."¹⁶⁰

Ulaanbaatar houses a high profile, professionally managed TV station, Eagle TV, which combines news, entertainment and Christian proselytizing. Eagle TV was first opened in the nineties as a joint American and Mongolian project. Due to disagreements among the owners, the station was closed in 2003 and reopened eighteen months later, in 2005, with only American backing from the AMONG Foundation.¹⁶¹ Tom Terry has been the director of Eagle TV since 2002. Eagle TV broadcasts both non-religious news¹⁶² and Christian evangelistic programs and has over hundred employees, Christian and non-Christian, making it the second largest television employer in Mongolia, behind Mongolian National Television.¹⁶³ The Christian programs include cartoons depicting Bible stories, preaching by American evangelicals, and a program for learning English addressed to young people.

The station is criticized by some Mongolian church leaders¹⁶⁴ for being too American and showing mostly translated American programs and thus not reflecting Mongolian Christianity.¹⁶⁵ According to Pastor Bold from the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Eagle TV shows so many

¹⁶⁰ Living Word Christian Church, www.lwcc.mn as accessed 25.04.2011.

¹⁶¹ Interview with Narantsetseg, former employee in Eagle TV, 21.05.2009.

¹⁶² Pastor Purevdorj questions the objectivity of the news, saying that Eagle TV is always showing the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP, since November 2010 Mongolian People's Party, MPP) in negative light, while the Democratic Party (DP) is always portrayed positively (interview, 25.05.2009).

¹⁶³ AMONG Foundation, <http://amongfoundation.com/staticpages/index.php?page=20080329021416217>, as accessed 07.05.2009

¹⁶⁴ I have not heard criticism from regular Christians, just from the leaders. Most Mongolian Christians I asked about Eagle TV were happy that there was a Christian TV in Mongolia.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009.

translated programs because there are very few well educated evangelists in Mongolia who could do it instead.¹⁶⁶ Pastor Purevdorj, the principal of the Union Bible Theological College (UBTC), admits that the school has been addressed by the Eagle TV with a proposition of cooperation, but says that the UBTC board has been very skeptical to the idea. Purevdorj does not believe UBTC would be allowed to decide about the character of the programs. He accuses Tom Terry and the American owners of Eagle TV for presenting Christianity in Mongolia as “a little, poor child, trying to gain respect from the public.”¹⁶⁷

While Eagle TV broadcasts both non-religious news and Christian preaching, the Christian radio station, WIND FM, has a thoroughly Christian profile. WIND FM was founded in 2001 after local Christians made a proposal to Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC) to start a Christian radio station in Mongolia. The modern building from which the radio is broadcasting was built with help from a Finnish Evangelical missionary group. Mongolian law does not allow registration of non-commercial radio stations, and FEBC’s philosophy is to use radio for ministry and not for commercial reasons. To solve the issue FEBC registered two separate entities: Entertainment WIND and Development WIND. Entertainment WIND is the station itself, while Development WIND is an NGO with the main task of preparing programs for the radio.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, the law forbids the station to be advertised as a Christian radio and to produce programs with Christian character. To bypass the law, the programs are produced in cooperation with faith based organizations such as World Vision, as well as evangelical churches and organizations (e.g. UBTC and MEA).¹⁶⁹ To illustrate the procedure: UBTC contracts Development WIND to produce a program on a certain Christian topic, then Development WIND pays WIND FM to air it, and the anchors announce: “this is a UBTC program”. Thus WIND FM earns money (commercial radio) and is allowed to air programs with an exclusively Christian message, because they are produced externally.

166 Interview with Pastor Bold, 02.06.2009.

167 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009. Pastor Purevdorj mentioned that few years back a group of more than ten church leaders addressed Tom Terry and the chairman of AMONG Foundation, asking them to stop posting negative opinions about Christians and Christian leaders in Mongolia on internet.

168 Development WIND has also commenced community outreach project directed at women living in the poorest parts of Ulaanbaatar. It is based on weekly meetings lead by volunteers from local churches, where women can learn about financial management, health and hygiene or practical skills (stitching, cooking). They also discuss abuse issues and family relationships from a Christian perspective (interview with Barbara Podmore, 26.05.2009).

169 Interview with Barbara Podmore, 26.05.2009.

WIND FM is often referred to as “family radio”. The programs prepared by WIND FM revolve around promoting family and community values from a Christian perspective. They address everyday issues faced by families, while at the same time introducing biblical concepts and trying to create a more positive image of Christianity in the society.¹⁷⁰ All employees are Mongolian and almost all are Christian, but the directors are foreigners from FEBC. The anchors are also not allowed to profess their religion on air. Instead the guests speak about Christianity, and the anchors just steer the conversation in the desired direction. One example: a pastor is invited and listeners can call and ask questions about the life problems they are facing. The pastor will give them answers from the Bible or from a “Christian perspective.”¹⁷¹

Humanitarian work

The difficult economic situation in Mongolia after the end of communism has led to a breakdown of social services which were once heavily subsidized by the state under the socialist system. The three pillars of socialist modernization (education, healthcare and material security) deteriorated after 1990. The lack of income and the increasing number of poor have forced heavy reliance on foreign aid (Odgaard, 2006: 122). The many Christian non-governmental development organizations (NGOs) working in Mongolia offer basic social services, that otherwise are not available, or at least not adequate, to those who need them.¹⁷² Therefore, when discussing Christian mission in Mongolia, I find it conceptually useful to distinguish between direct evangelization (verbal presentation of the gospel) and indirect evangelization (influence through development and social work).¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009.

¹⁷¹Interview with Barbara Podmore, 26.05.2009.

¹⁷² For an analysis of Christian faith-based NGOs in Mongolia, see Byambajav (2006). The popular connection between Christianity and social projects was so strong in Mongolia, that Pastor Purevdorj admitted that at some point persons invited to come to church were likely to reply that they did not really need help, but that they knew somebody who was an alcoholic, or disadvantaged in another way, who should be invited instead. However, this attitude is partially changing as more highly educated professionals and celebrities profess Christianity openly (interview, 25.05.2009).

¹⁷³ Mathijs Pelkmans researched faith-based organizations in Kyrgyzstan, a land-locked former Soviet Republic, which after the fall of communism suffered serious economic crisis, and with its liberal religious law attracted hundreds of Christian missionaries. Pelkmans discovered that the missionaries saw no problem in combining development work and proselytizing, often referring to Acts (18: 1-5) where Paul described the value of combining evangelization with being professionally active in a local setting. The employees of the faith-based organizations working in Kyrgyzstan stressed the importance of religious freedom and the agency of the individuals to choose religion. They just wanted to make sure that people had “freedom of choice” and that they knew enough about Christianity to make an informed decision. However, Pelkmans notes that the missionary initiatives are able to draw on much larger financial reservoirs than the local religious institutions, and that given the economic crisis and the inability of the government to maintain a functioning social security system, the services provided by missionary movements meet a real need (2009: 431-434). The parallels between the

The faith-based NGOs provide healthcare, childcare, medical aid to rural communities, business courses, and distribute food and clothing to the urban poor. They cater to the needs of prisoners, alcoholics, street children and other underprivileged groups. The provision of social services, only indirectly evangelical, can potentially increase the appeal of Christianity. The NGOs differ in their attitude towards combining proselytizing with development work.¹⁷⁴ While some strongly differentiate between the two, claiming that they do not evangelize at work and that they only wish to introduce people to the Christian values through their lifestyle. Others are more straightforward about the connection between development work and evangelization.¹⁷⁵

The Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM) belongs to the first category. NLM has been present in Mongolia since 1994 and has in this time implemented a number of health, agriculture, and family oriented projects. In 2008 two new projects were commenced, one concentrating on training doctors within primary health care, and another focused on strengthening children's rights. All the projects are run in close cooperation with the local governments and they stress the importance of competence building and empowering the local communities.¹⁷⁶

Since ninety percent of NLM's funding comes from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad),¹⁷⁷ the directorate demands strict limitations on proselytizing. Therefore communication of the Christian message happens through socializing with Mongolian teammates and partners. While the missionaries are forbidden also by Mongolian law to evangelize during work hours, they are free to do whatever they want in their spare time. According to Kai Ove Berg, when people work together every day, it is natural to have dialogue about religion and faith. As a result a number of people become interested in Christianity and start meeting in informal small groups led by the Norwegians. Some Mongolians convert. The churches which were started in consequence are not officially connected to NLM, but

activity and attitude of the missionaries associated with faith-based organizations in Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia are quite striking and point to ethical issues, which are beyond the scope of this paper,

174 There seems to have been some negative press about the Christian faith-based NGOs in Mongolia, and several members of different organizations were a bit apprehensive about talking to me. I was asked about my religion, "my angle," and whether I was "against Christianity." Employees of one of the big international faith-based NGOs told me that they had become more careful and suspicious when talking to journalists and researchers after some negative media descriptions of the Christian NGOs.

175 E.g. the South African pastor, Rob Forbes admits that many Christian groups separate their development work from their church, but for him it was important to build clear connection between the NGO and the church (interview, 31.05.2009).

176 Interview with Kai Ove Berg, 07.05.2009.

177 A directorate under the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).

independent and Mongolian led, but NLM helps with financing. In 2009 six students were studying in UBTC thanks to scholarships funded by NLM.¹⁷⁸

One example of a more active dependency between development work and evangelization in Mongolia is the involvement of faith-based organizations in alcohol abuse related programs.¹⁷⁹ Alcoholism is rampant in Mongolia, and the Mongolian government has so far failed to combat this huge social problem. Most of the projects addressing alcohol abuse are initiated by non-governmental organizations. Sean Armstrong's and Byamba Tsogtbaatar's research shows that among thirty-two projects attempting to fight alcoholism in 2008, only two were not "faith-based"¹⁸⁰ (Armstrong and Tsogtbaatar, 2010: 214).

Macedonian Services Foundation International,¹⁸¹ like many other non-governmental organizations, provides alcohol abuse classes. They follow a twelve-step program, which uses the Bible as the basis. The attendance reaches 120 persons, divided into several classes. Twice a week they teach a class in MAANT, a correctional facility outside of Ulaanbaatar, where recurring drunken offenders are taken to be re-socialized. The NGO has also sponsored the purchase of new beds for the facility. As a result of their work, quite a few of the class attendees come to the church associated with the NGO, and some of them convert to Christianity.¹⁸² An example of an in-church program is the "Celebrate Recovery," a twelve-step program for people addicted to alcohol and drugs in the Living Word Christian Church. While it is open to everybody, it is common that the attendees convert to Christianity.¹⁸³

In order to become more effective in the development work, a consortium called Joint Christian Services (JCS) was established in Mongolia in 1993. It now comprises fourteen¹⁸⁴ different Christian agencies working together as one international NGO, and it is involved in a

178 Interview with Kai Ove Berg, 07.05.2009.

179 In Mongolia there is a very strong association between Christianity and abstinence, almost to the point where it is seen as a distinguishing sign of being Christian. A young Christian student told me, for example, that some of the boys she had met in the church were not really Christian, because she saw them drinking alcohol one evening.

180 Great majority of them is Christian. However, some of the Buddhist organizations have begun to organize activities meant to combat alcoholism or help the addicts. E.g. Panchen Otrul Rinpoche from the Asral NGO travels to the countryside and teaches about the dangers of alcohol (interview with employees of Asral NGO: Mungun, Otgoo and Baaska, 18.05.2009).

181 The NGO has no connection to Macedonia; it was started by a group of American Baptists.

182 Interview with Bill Cooper, 11.05.2009.

183 Interview with Pastor Tsolmonbaatar, 17.05.2009.

184 DanMission, OMF International, Evangelical Covenant Church Department of World Mission, SIM, InterAct, Team Expansion, Japan Association Christ Church, World Partners, Liebenzell, World Mission Prayer League, Mennonite Mission Network, World Venture, Mission to Unreached People, YWAM.

number of projects within the areas agriculture, health, education, administration, business, English teaching, youth work, and relief.¹⁸⁵ JCS is not an umbrella organization, it is led centrally and all projects are coordinated. From the purpose statement we read: “JCS shares the Good News of Jesus Christ with the people of Mongolia by working with them to achieve their full, God-given potential through development, relief, and encouraging the planting, growth, development and unity of the indigenous churches.”¹⁸⁶ The member agencies differ in the emphasis put on the importance of evangelization, but through compromises JCS has been able to function for almost twenty years, despite denominational and ideological differences.

The Roman Catholic Church

The legal situation of the Roman Catholic Church¹⁸⁷ in Mongolia is partially different from that of the other denominations, as the Catholic priests fulfill a dual role. They are officially the Vatican’s ambassadors, and therefore political diplomats, and also religious missionaries. In June 1990, the Mongolian government contacted the Holy See to explore the possibilities for establishing diplomatic relations. In March 1992, the Holy See re-established Mongolia as *sui iuris* mission. In April 1992, the decision to establish diplomatic relations between Mongolia and the Holy See on the level of a *nunciature*¹⁸⁸ was made public. The first *nuncio* to Mongolia was Msgr. Giovanni Bulaitis. With the arrival of the first three Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM) missionaries on July 10, 1992, the presence of the Catholic Church started. The first three fathers to staff the mission were Wenceslao Padilla, Robert Goessens and Gilbert Sales. The first project led by the Catholic missionaries was establishing a center for street children in 1995. Now the Verbist Care Center houses around one hundred children and young people, all of them in some level of education, from kindergarten to university.¹⁸⁹

The first parish, Sts. Peter and Paul, was officially established in 1996 in the thirteenth microdistrict of Ulaanbaatar, and was until 2002 the only existing parish in Mongolia. Currently there are three parishes in Ulaanbaatar. The other two are: Our Lady of Assumption, in the Khan Uul District (2002) and Good Shepherd Parish in the tenth microdistrict (2003). In 2007 the Maria Auxilium Parish was established in Darkhan, the second biggest city of Mongolia.

¹⁸⁵ For more information on the projects, see www.jcsintl.org.

¹⁸⁶ JCS’ website, www.jcsintl.org, as accessed 05.04.2011.

¹⁸⁷ For more information on the Roman Catholic Church in Mongolia, see the mission’s website at: www.catholicchurch-mongolia.mn.

¹⁸⁸ The highest level of diplomatic mission of the Vatican, equivalent to an embassy. It is led by a *nuncio*, who is a permanent diplomatic representative of the Holy See in a rank of ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary

¹⁸⁹ Interview with Father James, 18.05.2009.

Doctrine classes were started in 1994, and during Easter 1995, after a year of preparation, fourteen local people were baptized. Since then, there have been baptisms of small groups of Mongolians every Easter. Later, the preparation time before baptism has been extended to two years. In 2003 Father Padilla was consecrated as the first bishop of Mongolia. Pope John Paul II had been invited by the President of Mongolia during his visit to the Vatican in 2000, the plans had, however, been canceled due to the Pope's poor health. In 2002 the mission was transformed



into an apostolic prefecture.¹⁹⁰ Wenceslao Padilla became the apostolic prefect and was ordained as first bishop of Mongolia in 2003. The *ger*-shaped Sts Peter and Paul's cathedral (photography) was consecrated in the same year.¹⁹¹

In 2011, the Mongolian Catholic Church operates four parishes, three mission centers, and four parish sub-stations. There are seventy-four priests, nuns and lay missionaries from twenty-three nationalities¹⁹² belonging to eleven congregations. Around 760 Mongolians have been baptized. There is no native clergy as of April 2011, but the first Mongolian is studying in a seminary in South Korea and another will begin studies after completing Korean language instruction. The Catholic Church has organized a number of social, developmental, educational, and humanitarian projects. There are three centers for street children, a center for elderly men, a center for children with disabilities, two Montessori kindergartens, two primary schools, a technical school, language centers, youth and children's centers, scholarship programs, two student dormitories; a library, a medical clinic; two agricultural farms, Caritas Mongolia, and the Antoon Mostaert Center which is devoted to research on Mongolian culture and translations of Church materials and documents. The Catholic literature published in Mongolian includes *English-Mongolian Catholic Dictionary*, the *Book of Hymns* in the vernacular, the *Mass Lectionary*, and the *Compendium on the Catechism of the Catholic Church*¹⁹³.

¹⁹⁰ A Catholic missionary region not sufficiently developed to become a diocese (district), but in practice functioning similarly to a diocese, led by an apostolic prefect.

¹⁹¹ Interview with Father James, 18.05.2009. Catholic History Power Point presentation.

¹⁹² South Koreans are the biggest group.

¹⁹³ Catholic Church in Mongolia, www.catholicchurch-mongolia.mn, as accessed 05.05.2011.

The Catholic Church in Mongolia reaches out mostly to the young and the poorest people. Father James stresses the importance of patience and building solid foundation for the Catholic presence. Social work is more important than baptizing many people and he emphasizes that the majority of those who benefit from the social programs do not convert to Catholicism.



One of the many social projects is the Don Bosco Technical Skills Center (photography), which provides the underprivileged boys and girls in the age group 16-23 with a two year technical training course, meant to increase opportunities for employment. The three major courses are woodworking, industrial sewing and automechanics. Moreover, the students attend English,

computer and typing classes and are obliged to take part in “values education courses,” but direct religious instruction is not allowed in the school.¹⁹⁴

In Mongolia children need to finish eight grades of general education before they can attend vocational school. Those who drop out earlier lose the possibility to learn a profession. Don Bosco, as the only school in Mongolia, has received permission from the government to enroll young people, who have only finished six grades of general education. The school has also received awards as one of the best vocational schools in the country.¹⁹⁵ The Catholic Church also provides scholarships for “worthy and deserving” young people to attend Mongolian colleges and universities and in the future hopes to establish a Catholic university in Mongolia.¹⁹⁶

The example of the Don Bosco school shows how the Mongolian government, unable to provide the welfare services for the citizens, cooperates with religious actors, granting them special rights and letting them take over in certain areas of social care. While the Mongolian law upholds functional differentiation, the reality forces the government to accept partial de-differentiation, understood as the transfer of responsibilities, ascribed to the secular sphere (in the process of differentiation), back to religious organizations. Other example are the many centers

¹⁹⁴ Interview with Father James, 18.05.2009; Catholic History Power Point presentation.

¹⁹⁵ Interview with Father Wiktor, 19.05.2009.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Father James, 18.05.2009. Catholic History Power Point presentation.

caring for homeless, neglected or orphaned children, such as the Savio children's home run by Salesian (Catholic order) priests and volunteers.¹⁹⁷ In the Savio home, children get roof over their head, warm meals, a possibility to finish school and people who care about them. At the same time they are taught how to pray, they are told about God and invited to catechism classes.¹⁹⁸

The Jesus Christ Church of Latter-Day Saints

The Jesus Christ Church of the Latter-Day Saints (LDS, also known as the Mormons) started sending missionaries to Mongolia as early as 1992. In July 1995 the first mission was established with Richard E. Cook as the first mission president. Right now there are almost 10,000 members in the Mongolian LDS.¹⁹⁹ According to the mission president Dee Allen Andersen, between ten and thirty percent of the new members come from other Christian churches. He says that Mongolians change churches and denominations freely, especially within the Protestant churches. In his opinion the LDS Church and the Catholic Church are those who lose the least members due to "church hopping."²⁰⁰

Missionizing is very important for the Mormons and all young church members are encouraged to serve in the mission field for one-and-a-half or two years. In 2009 there were about 170 active LDS missionaries in Mongolia, about forty of them foreigners. Foreign missionaries take an intense Mongolian course, with twelve hours of instruction daily, for three months before arriving in the country.²⁰¹ Their Mongolian language skills are impressive. The Mormons stress the importance of translating scriptures and all the main texts are already available in Mongolian, including the monthly LDS journal *Liahona*. The leadership positions are not paid and the young missionaries are supported by their parents. However, Mongolian missionaries, due to their limited financial means, are often supported through the Church.²⁰²

The Mormon missionaries work in pairs, usually one foreigner and one Mongolian, so that they can improve each other's language. The missionary pair lives and works together for two and a half months, in one of the about hundred apartments belonging to the Church – after

197 There are numerous such examples also in other denominations. E.g. according to evangelical pastor, Rob Forbes, the government covers a quarter of the expenses for the kindergarten run by Khuslen Education NGO, associated with the All Nations church. The NGO and the church are closely connected and if parents sign agreement, children are taught stories from the Bible (interview, 31.05.2009).

198 Visit to Savio children's home and personal communication with the priests and volunteers, 19.05.2009.

199 LDS country information, <http://newsroom.lds.org/country/mongolia>, as accessed 10.05.2011.

200 Interview with Dee Allen Andersen, 13.05.2009.

201 Interview with William Clark, 13.05.2009.

202 Interview with Malan Jackson, 13.05.2009.

that time the pairs are changed. The American missionaries come to Mongolia as English teachers and are obliged to work as teachers twenty to thirty hours per week. The remaining time is devoted to evangelization. In their dark suits and white shirts and wearing name tags, they are an easily recognizable and common everyday sight in Mongolia. They approach people and try to start a conversation and they ask if the person has time to invite them home or whether they could schedule a time for a later visit. They prefer to talk at the potential convert's home because it is considered a safe environment. They normally have four meetings in a Mongolian home before they invite the person to come to church.²⁰³



English classes and religious education for non-members are organized in the basement of the main Mormon building in the center of Ulaanbaatar (photography). This is a very modern, impressive five-storey building, with a big chapel on the ground floor.²⁰⁴ The LDS Church also engages in teaching English and training professionals including judges, doctors, government members, and businessmen. The training is conducted not only in Mongolia, but also in the United States.²⁰⁵ As a consequence the LDS Church has higher percentage of highly educated professionals than many other Christian churches.²⁰⁶ The LDS Church offers

scholarships to young members for studies abroad in the branches of Brigham Young University in Utah and in Hawaii.²⁰⁷

203 Personal communication with elder Gibson and elder Hoffman, 20.05.2009.

204 The LDS buildings seem to be built to impress. They are big, modern and attract attention. They also seem to be built a bit ahead of the need – several of the missionaries from other denominations, mentioned that the Mormon buildings are very impressive, but they never see any activity in any of them, except the central one. During the month I spent in Ulaanbaatar I walked by one of the LDS buildings in the center of Ulaanbaatar almost every day and did not see anybody there. The building was always closed. I was also informed by the Mormon missionaries that the chapel inside the central building is constructed in a way that one of the walls can be taken out, making the chapel much bigger. It confirms that the future growth in membership is taken into account in construction.

205 Interview with Malan Jackson, 13.05.2009.

206 Interview with Dee Allen Andersen, 13.05.2009.

207 Allegedly there have been problems with young Church members sent abroad who do not return to Mongolia, some disappearing already at the airport after landing in the US. When asked, the church representatives did not confirm this information, but they admitted that presently young people who wish to receive scholarship for study abroad need to sign a contract where they pledge to return to Mongolia after finished studies.

In order to encourage cooperation between different religions, in 2009 the LDS Church organized a community project for cleaning the banks of the river Selbe, which runs through Ulaanbaatar. They invited other religious groups to participate and almost 800 volunteers helped, including members of the Mongolian Muslim Society, the Roman Catholic Church, Dashchoiling Buddhist Monastery and the Sri Sri Meditations Center.²⁰⁸

The Seventh-day Adventist Church

The first Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) missionaries in Mongolia were sent by the Adventist Frontier Mission (AFM), an organization which sends people to places where the Adventist Church is not present. The first missionaries were Brad and Cathy Jolly, a young American couple who came to Mongolia in 1991 on a student visa to learn Mongolian. They lived in a student dormitory, spoke to other people about Christianity and invited them to house meetings in small groups.²⁰⁹ In September 1993 three Mongolians were baptized. In November 1997 the first Mongolian SDA church was established, with twenty-six members. Now there are twenty-two SDA churches in Mongolia and approximately 1,600 members. The majority of the church members are under thirty years of age.²¹⁰ There are two ordained Mongolian Adventist pastors and national leadership training is a priority. Through the “1000 Missionary Movement”, young Mongolian Adventists are trained for missionary work. While the SDA Church does not officially ordain women pastors, there are Adventist women church leaders in Mongolia. Their training and functions are practically identical to that of the pastors’, with the exception that women church leaders cannot ordain other pastor. The SDA Church in Mongolia maintains strong denominational identity and stresses the fact that it is a powerful worldwide church. Some of the leaders travel abroad to study, to SDA education institutions in the Philippines, America and Korea. The SDA Church does not cooperate with other Christians denominations in Mongolia. According to Paul Kotanko one of the reasons is the influence of the South Korean evangelical missionaries, who import their negative attitude towards SDA, making it difficult for the Adventists to collaborate with the evangelical churches in any way.²¹¹

The SDA Church is a highly mission-oriented denomination. Paul Kotanko thinks that Mongolians are prejudiced against Christianity, which makes them difficult to approach.

208 UB Post, *Mongolia: Cleaning Up a City, Making New Friends*, No. 27(684), 22.05.2009.

209 Interview with Paul Kotanko, 01.06.2009.

210 SDA statistics, available at www.adventiststatistics.org, as accessed 20.04.2011.

211 Interview with Paul Kotanko, 01.06.2009.

Therefore the SDA Church has programs such as language instruction and public evangelistic meetings which are meant to attract people, but they emphasize that “no strings are attached;” there is no obligation to join the Church or even listen to the spiritual message. In 2007 the SDA Language Institute was opened in Ulaanbaatar. It offers high level of English and Korean instruction. The students are introduced to Christianity and invited to visit the church in a subtle way, since the law prohibits combining language instruction with proselytizing. The school offers Sabbath service and many students attend, but there are no further requirements and many students never return.²¹² A second type of language classes is organized through the church for members or sympathizers who attend Bible study. These classes are free, and there is no obligation to stay in the church after classes are finished.²¹³

Another evangelistic method is organization of public evangelistic meetings in rented halls. The meetings are advertized in the media and take place every evening for between one and two weeks. The meetings often consist of two parts: the first part is a lecture on for example health related issues, while the second is led by an evangelistic speaker. The purpose of the meetings is informative, to present the SDA Church and invite people to join. A person interested in the church is encouraged to attend the service in their local SDA church and the Sabbath school where they study a standard SDA study guide translated into Mongolian by the Church. Preparation to baptism may take anything between a week and a year, there is no set time. The SDA Church has a small scholarship fund for unprivileged church members. The recipients are reviewed every year with regard to church activity and grades.²¹⁴

There are two NGOs associated with SDA in Mongolia. The first of them, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) is a global humanitarian organization. ADRA’s mission is to “through humanitarian acts make known the just, merciful and loving character of God.” However, “ADRA does not proselytize. It operates and is motivated by love that has no strings attached. God’s love in ADRA program activities is expressed when it reaches out to those in need regardless of race, gender, and political, or religious affiliation.”²¹⁵ ADRA Mongolia implements a wide variety of relief and development projects, including health and education programs, disaster management programs, micro-economic development programs,

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Interview with Pastor Bold, 02.06.2009.

²¹⁴ Interview with Paul Kotanko, 01.06.2009.

²¹⁵ ADRA’s website, www.adra.org, as accessed 15.05.2011.

and a food security program.²¹⁶ The second NGO, the Adventist Mongolian Outreach Service, is a local NGO of the Mongolian Adventist Mission (AMOS), financed by the Adventist Church. It is involved in smaller scale local projects such as distributing clothes, fundraising for hospital equipment, and translation of DVDs about healthy living from English into Mongolian. The health lectures during evangelistic meetings are also organized by AMOS.²¹⁷

The Russian Orthodox Church

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) did not start its activity in Mongolia until 1998.²¹⁸ The Holy Trinity parish was reestablished across the street from the old church building. At first the church functioned in a reconstructed apartment building. In 2000 an Orthodox priest came from



Moscow to conduct the Sunday services. The first parishioners were Russian immigrants and diplomats. In the beginning of 1990s there were 130,000 Russians living and working in Mongolia, but many moved after the fall of communism and by 2010 most had left. The current priest, father Aleksey Trubach, came to Ulaanbaatar in 2005. In 2006 the construction of a new church building was commenced. It was

finished in March 2009. The church was built in the 15th-16th century Russian style with frescoes incorporating Mongolian phrases inside. ROC started missionary outreach in 2005, but according to father Aleksey there had been difficulties, because of the negative associations with the Soviet era. Mongolians think of the church as a “Russian Church” and the common notion, even among Mongolian Christians, is that the church is only for Russians.²¹⁹ For that reason Father Aleksey prefers to work with whole families, instead of individuals. The small park surrounding the church is always open, so that people can come and relax. During my fieldwork in 2009, there

²¹⁶ For more on ADRA’s work in Mongolia, see www.adra.org.mn.

²¹⁷ Interview with Paul Kotanko, 01.06.2009.

²¹⁸ After the fall of communism all attention was directed to the reconstruction of the ROC in Russia and missionary activity was not a priority (interview with Father Aleksey, 14.05.2009).

²¹⁹ This agrees with my observations, when I asked Mongolian Christians whether they had been to the Russian Orthodox church, they replied that they had not, because the church is only for Russians.

were fifteen Mongolians in the church. Fifteen more were studying Orthodoxy with father Aleksey and preparing to baptism.²²⁰

Concluding remarks

There is no simple answer to the questions posed in the beginning of this chapter by Pastor Purevdorj. The reasons for the growth of Christianity in Mongolia in the last two decades are complex and many. I do believe, however, that the combination of certain factors, which in the previous chapters I have described as the “Mongolian context” after 1990, has created favorable conditions for the introduction of new ideas, from which the first Christian missionaries benefited. Gertrude Dubach, pastor in the Everlasting Dawn church, and a long term missionary, came to Mongolia in 1993 and thus observed the growth of Christianity almost from the beginning. She admits that in the beginning Christianity was perceived as new and exciting and many Mongolians were attracted to the message promoted by some of the missionaries, sometimes labeled as “prosperity gospel.”²²¹ People responded enthusiastically to a gospel that promised them blessings in this life as well as the next. For many life did indeed improve, as the new faith was able to inspire new discipline and responsibility. But others were disappointed and disillusioned when their problems did not disappear, and left Christianity.²²²

Gertrude Dubach believes that this is a natural development and Christianity in Mongolia has entered a new stage, which she calls a “consolidation stage.” The growth has slowed down and the next step is for Mongolians to figure out what it means to be Mongolian and a Christian. The churches are still strongly influenced by foreigners, but Mongolian Christians have begun the journey of building indigenous expression of Christianity.²²³ This process of contextualization of Christianity and the interplay between Mongolian church leaders and foreign missionaries is the topic of the next and final chapter.

220 Interview with Father Aleksey, 14.05.2009.

221 The idea behind the “prosperity gospel” is that Jesus gives spiritual blessing, material gain, and physical health to his followers. It is popular in certain evangelical churches, especially Pentecostal.

222 Interview with Gertrude Dubach, 25.5.2009.

223 Ibid.

Chapter 5

Contextualization of Christianity in Mongolia

In the second chapter I have established that the world is not homogenous and that the theory of multiple modernities applies to religion as it explains and validates the existence of multiple Christianities. When foreign ideas are introduced to a new environment they undergo changes and are integrated and reinvented within the traditional culture. Christianity, just like modernity, when transmitted to the non-Western world, has a dynamic of its own, and takes shape quite different from that of its Western counterparts. This chapter builds further on the idea that even if the premise is similar everywhere, the process depends on the local conditions, and the developments differ significantly between societies with different cultural backgrounds.

In the previous chapters I showed how Christian missionaries navigate the specific Mongolian context in order to promote their beliefs and how Mongolian religious scene responds to the presence of the Christian missionaries. This chapter takes the opposite approach to Christian mission in Mongolia, as it studies how Christianity changes in meeting with the specific Mongolian context. In other words this chapter revolves contextualization of Christianity in Mongolia and the politics of syncretism.

What we are witnessing in contemporary Mongolia is a third wave of missionary efforts of Western Christianity to “conquer the steppe”. In the first chapter I have analyzed the previous attempts. The Catholic envoys to the Great Khans in the Mongol Empire failed, because the Khans rejected their exclusivist worldview. So did the missionaries in the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century. The steppes of Outer Mongolia turned out to be hostile and inaccessible, the nomadic settlements were not permanent and sparse and the work brought few converts. Therefore, most missionaries concentrated on the settled, agricultural Chinese communities in Inner Mongolia, and only very few like James Gilmour and Frans Larson, attempted life on the steppe. The only successful Christian missionaries in the Mongol lands did not come from the West. The Syriac-rite Nestorians, deemed as heretics by Western Christianity, managed to gain significant influence among some of the Mongol tribes.

Interestingly, one of the Catholic missionaries to the Mongol court, William of Rubruck, described the Christianity of Central Asian Nestorians in a very critical way. For him the syncretism of Christianity and the local practices meant an unacceptable weakening of the “true

message”. Much has changed since the time of Rubruck, and now the Christian missionaries speak of dialogue with other religions and adapting Christianity to the local culture. This new wave of Christian missionaries to Mongolia began only two decades ago, and therefore it is difficult to predict its long term effects. However, it is possible to assess whether the methods and attitude of the missionaries towards the local traditions have changed. The process of localization of Christianity in Mongolia has barely begun, and if anything, my analysis underlines the fluidity of the boundaries in the Mongolian interpretations of Christianity. Therefore, instead of pointing out how Christianity in Mongolia differs from Christianity anywhere else, I concentrate on the interplay between the ideas and influence of the foreign missionaries and the response and actions of Mongolian Christians.

Analysis of contextualization from the point of view of the missionaries requires looking at the history of missions, and how the approach of missionaries to the nations they attempt to convert, has changed with time. It is followed by theoretical considerations surrounding the concepts of syncretism, contextualization and inculturation, supported by examples from contemporary Mongolia as to how the concepts are employed by the missionaries and the missionized. Hopefully the presentation of the discourse between missionaries and Mongolian Christians will show the twofold influence of context on religious change. On the one hand Mongolian historical context shapes the character of Mongolian Christianity in the process of contextualization, while on the other, the background of the missionaries (historical, denominational and cultural) forms their view of how Christianity “should” be contextualized. First of all, however, it is important to introduce the category of syncretism and its analytical usefulness.

The analytical usefulness of the concept of ‘syncretism’

When discussing localization of religion, ‘syncretism’ is perhaps the most commonly used analytical category. Though used already in Ancient Greece, first with clearly positive connotations (Shaw and Stewart, 1994: 3), once defined as a *religionsmischerei*, i.e. confusion of religions, syncretism has taken on a derogatory meaning (Bowker, 2000: 569). Judith Berling defines syncretism as the “borrowing, affirmation, or integration of concepts, symbols or practices of one religious tradition into another by a process of selection and reconciliation” (1980: 9). The notion is connected with the transmission of religion to a new area, and describes the changes and innovations resulting from cultural and religious contact. While the degrees and

types of syncretic transformations vary greatly depending on the historical, cultural, political, and social contexts, this implies that every religion is syncretic, when viewed from the standpoint of its history (Rudolph, 2005: 80). Since Christianity, in its third wave, only begun localizing in modern Mongolia twenty years ago, I believe it is important to concentrate on the dynamic aspect of syncretism, and, as proposed by Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, study the processes of religious synthesis and the discourses of syncretism (1994: 7).

I find the distinction between the categories ‘unconscious’ (also called spontaneous or naïve) and ‘conscious syncretism’, as proposed by Kurt Rudolph, to be particularly useful for the present discussion. The former requires time, and is visible in popular beliefs. It is the way religion is integrated into the language, culture and politics and thereby made relevant to the broad mass of lay people and general believers. Unconscious syncretism results from a proximity and cultural interchange of traditions in contact. In this way it is a reciprocal influence affecting both the foreign and the native religion. The latter is based on reflection and analysis of the profits coming from the experience of contextualization, encouraged by the “bearers of tradition and thinkers reworking the articles of faith” (theologians, priests, etc.) (2005: 80-81).

I agree with Shaw and Stewart that any discussion about syncretism necessarily involves considerations of power and agency (1994: 7), and the following sections of the chapter attempt to show that foreign missionaries still try to retain both, even if not to the same extent as in the past centuries. Indigenizing projects are often elite attempts, imposed from top down, to control the direction of religious synthesis (ibid: 12). The foreign missionaries believe to hold the key to the “true Christianity,” including the authority to judge what can be labeled as the “good” contextualization – the acceptable adaptation and inculturation – and what should be suppressed as “bad” syncretism. Such forced and missionary-controlled syncretism, under the names of contextualization and inculturation, has become part of the missionary strategy.

Furthermore, Shaw and Stewart propose a useful demarcation between syncretism understood as ‘the politics of religious synthesis’ and ‘anti-syncretism,’ as the antagonism to religious synthesis, expressed by agents concerned with the defense of religious boundaries (ibid: 7). In my opinion, the key to understanding the current process of localization of Christianity in Mongolia lies in analyzing the ongoing interplay between processes syncretism and anti-syncretism where the missionaries are the agents of both: while they encourage some level of religious synthesis, they protect the boundaries of what they perceive as the core of Christianity.

At the same time, the influence of Mongolian historical context should not be underestimated as a factor affecting the direction of the syncretic changes and localization of Christianity.

Missionaries and contextualization – a historical perspective

The missionary character of Christianity means that it is bound to repeatedly interact with and relate to new cultures, different systems of thought and traditions. The history of Christian expansion has been one of successive penetration of diverse cultures. Paul is often seen as the first Christian missionary and theologian. His vision was worldwide, as he postulated that the entire world (known to him) was to be reached with the gospel (Bosch, 1991: 130). From the time of Paul, Christians have not rested in efforts to spread their message, first throughout the Roman Empire and eventually to the whole world. Interestingly Paul is also sometimes seen as an early apostle of inculturation (Lande, 2006: 89). Especially the first letter to Corinthians is thought to touch upon the issues of adapting the message to the receiver:

... “and unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law [...] that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.” (1 Cor. 9: 20-22).

Also in the letter to Galatians Paul clearly distinguished between religion and tradition. He saw circumcision as part of the Jewish tradition, not relevant for Gentile communities. He was not against circumcision as such – he just postulated that it was not meant to be a law regarding all Christians. Through acknowledging that separation of certain religious and cultural elements does not distort God’s Word, Paul opened for localization and adaptation of Christianity in meeting with new cultures (Lande, 2006: 89-90). And indeed the early churches adapted to a variety of contexts: Syriac, Greek, Roman, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopian as well as others. However, after Constantine declared Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, the church became associated with civilization. From then on, the Christian missionary outreach was understood as a movement from the “civilized” to the “savages”, and from a “superior” culture to “inferior” cultures (Bosch, 1991: 448).

During the colonial period, “syncretism” became a pejorative term for Christian missionaries. Associated with “impure” and “heretical” changes, it was often applied to criticize the non-Western churches that broke away from the sphere of mission control and began to

“illegitimately” indigenize Christianity, instead of properly reproducing the European model (Stewart, 2005:265; Shaw and Stewart, 1994: 1). In order to ease the conversion for the locals, small concessions were made. The Roman Catholic missionaries spoke about “adaptation” or “accommodation”, while the Protestants preferred the term “indigenization”, but it was implicit that all decisions were in the hands of the missionaries, taking away all the power and agency from the local converts (Bosch, 1991: 294-295). The adjustments were limited to minor matters such as liturgical vestments, non-sacramental rites, art, architecture and music. Moreover, only those cultural elements which the missionaries rendered as “neutral” and “naturally good” and not “contaminated” by pagan religious values could be employed (ibid: 448-449).

Separate from the colonial interests, the efforts of the Society of Jesus in Asia should be mentioned. The Jesuits, working without imperial backing, adopted attitudes of cultural compromise and accommodating Christianity to local cultures. The Jesuit missionary strategy consisted of absorbing peacefully anything not obviously contradictory to the Christian teaching, while avoiding imposing European customs, values, and prejudice. Despite the relative success of the Jesuit missions, in the beginning of the eighteenth century the Vatican prohibited most of the practices, including ancestor worship in China (Jenkins, 2002: 38-40).

The Enlightenment brought about the founding of voluntary Protestant societies, specifically devoted to foreign mission. From the 1880s, the United States started to lead in the number of missionary agencies and missionaries sent abroad. Christians at home, through prayers and donations, were able to feel a part of projects thousands of kilometers away. Women could travel as missionaries in their own right (Bosch, 1991: 327-328). Some of the most notable of these societies were the London Missionary Society (founded in 1795) and the China Inland Mission (founded in 1865). Especially the founder of the latter, James Hudson Taylor, is worth mentioning for setting up the base of the mission agency in China (and not in the West), promoting “living among the people” and not on mission stations, eating the local food and wearing the local clothes (ibid: 333).

During the course of the twentieth century, and especially in its second half, the understanding of the role of the missionary as well as of the relationship between culture and religion changed dramatically. The shift in Protestant thinking was expressed during the missionary conferences, starting in 1910 in Edinburgh. The World Council of Churches (WCC),

the broadest contemporary organ of international and interdenominational Christian cooperation,²²⁴ is a direct descendant of the conference. And it was in the 1972 WCC report *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund (1970-1977)*, that the actual concept of contextualization was taken into the vocabulary of theology. The concept was linked to the reflection on contexts in relation to the intercultural and interreligious translation processes, both verbal and nonverbal (Ahonen, 2003: 29).

In the Catholic Church the change came with the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (Vatican II, 1962-1965). During the council speakers from Africa, Asia and Latin America made major contributions and their views were reflected in the final version of decree on missionary activity *Ad Gentes* (Linden, 2009: 76-77). The purpose of the council was to open the Catholic Church to the world and adapt it to modern world. Thus, permissions were granted to translate the Latin liturgical texts and to celebrate most of the Mass in vernacular languages. Vatican II also opened up for accommodation to local traditions and acceptance of culturally-mixed religious expressions recognizing that a degree of cultural adaptation would not distort the Christian message (Stewart, 2005: 271-272).

Since 1910 the demography of world Christianity has changed dramatically. In Edinburgh the world was divided into the “missionized” (Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand) and the “not-yet-missionized” (everywhere else) areas. Today, as Europe is more secular than ever, the largest Christian communities can be found in Africa, Latin America, and in parts of Asia (Davie, 2002: 87-88). Christianity is no longer meant to be the bearer of Western culture, instead the ideas of contextualization and inculturation have been introduced. This represents a revolution of thinking and acting, since for many centuries, every deviation from what any group declared to be the orthodox faith was viewed in terms of heterodoxy or even heresy (Bosch, 1991: 421). Western Christianity is no longer the model all other societies are bound to accept.

224 “The WCC brings together 349 churches, denominations and church fellowships in more than 110 countries and territories throughout the world, representing over 560 million Christians and including most of the world's Orthodox churches, scores of Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed churches, as well as many United and Independent churches. While the bulk of the WCC's founding churches were European and North American, today most member churches are in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Middle East and the Pacific.” Source: www.oikumene.org, the official website of the World Council of Churches, as accessed 25.04.2011.

Traditional religio-political relations and present-day contextualization of Christianity in Mongolia

In the past the term syncretism has been used by Christian theologians to describe what they saw as a distortion of the essence of Christianity, its true message, therefore it acquired pejorative connotations. This picture is based on the notion of an original and pure doctrine, contaminated in the course of time by symbols and meanings from another, foreign (heathen) tradition (Shaw and Stewart, 1994: 1). The reason why syncretism acquired such negative undertones in Christian theology can be traced to the exclusivist and territorial understanding of religion in the West. Religion is a Western constructed category, not necessarily equally significant and easily defined in other cultural and historical contexts (Krogseth, 2007: 66). In case of a lack of a clear distinction between religious observance and other social practices, it may be difficult to differentiate syncretism from other types of cultural phenomena (Shaw and Stewart, 1994: 10).

Due to the exclusivist assumptions of Christianity, Asian religions have been misunderstood for centuries (Gellner, 2001: 70). Judith Berling's study of syncretism in China shows that the Christian model is not suitable for understanding all cultures and religions, and that in places, where religions are not mutually exclusive, syncretism does not need to be seen as a "betrayal". Berling points out that in China (like in many other Asian countries and regions), religions tend to be neither creedal nor exclusivist; belief, practice, and membership in more than one religion is possible (1980: 4). Moreover, research on conversions, resulting from Christian missions in non-Western societies, often concludes with a kind of double (or even multiple) religiosity. It appears that sometimes Christianity does not replace the previous beliefs, but is added and adapted to fit into the known local religious repertoire (Lande, 2006: 92-93). The old beliefs can coexist with, and are often not emically seen as contradicting with the new Christian faith. For example, an African Christian can ask for advice in a church and then visit a local healer (ibid: 97).

There are numerous such examples from different parts of the world, and the firm policy of religious tolerance in the Mongol Empire seems to fall into this category. In the imperial times priests of several religions were invited to the Mongol court, and all were asked to pray for their health and good fortune. The Mongols believed in achieving as much heavenly protection and help as possible and found it sensible to simply add new gods to the existing pantheon. This attitude seems to have persisted into the modern times to some extent, and could offer some clues to the reasons why Christianity is being so easily embraced by some Mongolians.

Another way of moving away from using Western analytical categories is by approaching religion as a multidimensional category, as proposed by David Gellner, where religion is comprised of soteriology or salvation dimension, social or communal dimension, and instrumental dimension, i.e. the attempt to make specific things happen within the world. This approach does not attempt to define religion in terms of belief, but in terms of what is done, and emphasizes that different kinds of religious actions are done for different purposes (2001: 70). Furthermore, following Melford Spiro's view that Buddhism should be understood as comprising of three systems: 'apotropaic' (concerned with this-worldly wellness and protection from danger), 'kammatic' (improving one's karma and achieving better rebirth) and 'nibbanic' (releasing oneself from the cycle of rebirth, nirvana) (1971: 12), one can see that it is the apotropaic Buddhism (corresponding to Gellner's 'instrumental religion') that is most susceptible to syncretism. At the same time the boundaries between kammatic and nibbanic Buddhism are blurred and syncretic processes are at work in both fields.²²⁵

Buddhism's soteriological orientation, concerned primarily with salvation, has opened for coexistence with other systems, which provide for other (more this-worldly) needs of its adherents. This has been the case in many places in Asia, and Westerners have found it difficult to understand. While the soteriological doctrine of Buddhism was easily accepted, for the quick result in this world still the local pre-Buddhist spirits and deities were being addressed (Gellner, 2001: 71). In the first chapter I showed that many elements of Mongolian pre-Buddhist beliefs were incorporated into Buddhism, when Mongols accepted it as their religion from the second half of the sixteenth century onwards. In the Buddhist missionary approach, syncretistic tendencies were observable from the outset. They consisted not of eliminating, but of assimilating pre-Buddhist practices and replacing the old rituals with new ones of the same function (Atwood, 1996: 115). However, many Mongolian traditions and beliefs were so important to people that the missionaries found it nearly impossible to force the nomads to leave them. Although the Mongols happily adopted Buddhist soteriological notions of karma and reincarnation, they kept venerating the local spirits and deities, forcing Buddhism to incorporate these numina within its cosmology (Jerryson, 2007: 12-13).

It seems that the history of syncretism and double (and in some cases multiple) religiosity may give important clues to present-day Mongolians' attitudes towards syncretism, e.g. that

225 See for example Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988)

many see no problem in combining practices of more than one religion. This attitude can explain many aspects of how Christianity is being localized at present in Mongolia. During my fieldwork I repeatedly encountered cases where Buddhist and Christian practices were combined, and I frequently told that Mongolians are practical people, who choose the religion that brings them most benefits.²²⁶ Father James, a Chinese Catholic priest, noticed that in Mongolia it is quite natural to be Buddhist and Christian at the same time.²²⁷ To illustrate this point, I will tell the story of a young girl, who I met in one of the Protestant churches. She first came to a Christian church because she had heard that somebody there spoke French, and she wanted to make friends with this person in order to practice her language skills. She told me she was coming to the worship meetings for a year and “praying to Buddha” when the group was praying to God. One day her father took her to a Buddhist monk, whom she asked about her future. The monk told her that she was going to bring “good news” to her family. She thought that maybe Christianity was the “good news” that the monk was talking about, so she decided to accept Christianity.

Such combined religiosity is also visible during funerals, and the Catholic priests admit to participating in funerals together with Buddhist monks. It appears that, even if the family is Buddhist, they are happy if a Christian priest comes to pray for the deceased, alongside the Buddhist monk.²²⁸ Rick Leatherwood in his book *Glory in Mongolia* describes attending a funeral in the countryside in the nineties. It was a Buddhist funeral, but the family of the deceased asked him to take part in the ceremony. Therefore, after the Buddhist monk recited prayers, Leatherwood read from the Bible (2006: 102-103). According to Father James, some people choose to have funerals or weddings in the church, not because of their beliefs, but because it is free, while Buddhist ceremonies are sometimes expensive.²²⁹ Pastor Purevdorj admits that holding Christian funerals is not easy and that often people try to “smuggle” some Buddhist elements into the ceremony. He also mentioned having a problem with the relatives of the deceased, who would often go to a Buddhist monk and ask what to do during the funeral, as if they felt that the Christian funeral was not valid. Therefore, Pastor Purevdorj now tells

226 E.g., from Markus Dubach: “Mongolians are always looking for options, they don’t like to put their eggs in one basket” (interview, 27.05.2009).

227 Interview with Father James, 18.05.2009.

228 Ibid, 18.05.2009 and interview with Father Wiktor, 19.05.2009.

229 Interview with Father James, 18.05.2009.

everybody that if they feel like they need to include something in the ceremony, they should come and ask him instead of going to a Buddhist monk.²³⁰

Furthermore, Mongolian Christians and foreign missionaries consciously use the history of pluralism to legitimize Christianity in contemporary Mongolia. By concentrating on the political reasons of the Mongol conversion to Buddhism, they contest the image of Buddhism as the “traditional” religion.²³¹ At the same time, stressing the Nestorian presence in the Mongol Empire, allows Christians to challenge the idea that Christianity is a foreign religion brought to Mongolia from the West. Moreover, in the history chapter I presented the Eternal Heaven as a deity more important than others. Some scholars, including Walther Heissig, claim that the Mongols believed in a heavenly power to which everything on and above the earth was subjected (1980: 47). During my fieldwork I was repeatedly told that: “Mongols have always believed in one God” or that “Chinggis Khan prayed to one God”.²³² And Rick Leatherwood applied this concept when he was preaching in the countryside (2006: 40-41). On some level the Eternal Heaven is equated to the Christian God, negating the feeling of accepting a foreign religion and “betraying” Mongolian tradition. While for some, the foreign and Western aspect of Christianity is exactly its appeal, for others, bringing up the Nestorian or pre-Buddhist past is an important validation, making the historical context an important tool in the process of localization of Christianity in Mongolia.

The missionary understanding of syncretism and the issues of power and agency in the Mongolian context

In order to understand contextualization, one has to realize that religion and culture are inseparable. Each religion is created in a certain cultural context, and when it moves to a new setting, i.e. a new context, it needs to adapt to the local conditions. This has been the case for Christianity, as much as for any other of the so called missionary world religions, which are at the same time local and global traditions (Shaw and Stewart, 1994: 13). The quest for the “core” or the “essence” of religion, the “pure” religion free of all that is human and culture-conditioned, is a futile one, as religions are always formulated with reference to existing value-systems.

230 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009.

231 I have heard this opinion also from non-Christians. Therefore it seems also partially to be the result of anti-religious school education during communism, stressing the political reasons for conversion and presenting Buddhism, as the religion brought to Mongolia as a tool to gain control over Mongols.

232 For example Marla, Barkhuu and Saruul made a point of telling me that the Eternal Heaven that Chinggis Khan prayed to is the same God as the Christian God, without me asking. It was obviously an important part of their Mongolian-Christian identity (personal communication, 14.05.2009)

Without referring to the existing symbols and values, how could one ever communicate the message to any other human being? (Sharpe, 1983: 139)

In the last decades, Christian churches and theologians have begun to recognize that there is no such thing as a “pure” religion, isolated from culture (Bosch, 1991: 297). The contemporary idea of inculturation in Christianity builds upon a creative space between the Bible and the culture. While certain dogmas or beliefs are rendered canonical and unchangeable, the accompanying rituals and beliefs, which are not considered central, are subject to reinterpretation (Vroom, 2005: 106). In this way inculturation, from a point of view of the majority of the Christian missionaries, becomes a necessity in order to spread to new territories, but it also involves the risk of moving too far away from the canonical tenants and thus “distorting” the message (Lande, 2006: 89).

Therefore, syncretism is still regarded with suspicion in most Christian churches and the missionaries still distinguish between the “acceptable” contextualization and the “negative” synthesis.²³³ The boundaries have been blurred, making the identification of syncretism more difficult and subjective, but the conviction that some adaptations of Christianity could distort the “true message” is still present.²³⁴ The missionaries have by no means given up the power to decide what the unchangeable core of Christianity is, and which of the local traditions or practices can be incorporated (Stewart, 2005: 272-273). Therefore the missionaries become the agents of syncretism and anti-syncretism, as defined by Shaw and Stewart (1994: 7).

However, the various denominations draw the boundary line between “good” contextualization and “bad” syncretism differently. The mission approach and the methodology of the Catholic missionaries are quite different from that of the Protestant missionaries.²³⁵ The Catholic missionaries are open to integrating the customs and traditions of Mongolia in their missionary work.²³⁶ Father James stressed that now the time has come to study and try to

233 E.g. Kathleen Martin writes that while the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council, adopted policy of inculturation, the language is still very cautionary regarding any “syncretism” of traditions (Martin, 2010:11).

234 See, for example: van Rheenen (ed.), 2006, a whole volume dedicated to the issues of distinguishing between “authentic” contextualization and “illegitimate” syncretism, as well as methods how to overcome the latter

235 The Mormons take pride in modeling their church in every country on the American pattern, and, besides extensive translation of scriptures, do not make any specific concessions to accommodate the local cultures (interview with William Clark, 13.05.2009). Therefore they are mostly excluded from this discussion.

236 My impression was that the Polish missionaries were slightly more conservative in their approach than those coming from Asian countries. Interestingly, this could prove that the differences in understanding of religion and attitudes towards syncretism between the West and Asia exist even within the Catholic Church, which has united missionary strategy and clear leadership in Vatican.

understand Mongolian traditions.²³⁷ Therefore the Catholic missionaries study the symbolism of the *ger*, fire, land, milk and tea offerings, in order to see what can be integrated into Christian worship. Among other issues, the Catholics are wondering whether they should use the traditional Mongolian silver cup for communion, and if they do, what symbolic meaning that will have for the Mongolians.²³⁸ The Protestant missionaries are more careful and apprehensive about the danger of “syncretism.” For them contextualization means national church leadership, self-sufficiency of churches, native missionary teams evangelizing in the countryside and abroad, as well as using scriptures and worship songs translated into Mongolian (Kemp, 2000: 214-215).

Moreover, as I established above, religion is a Western constructed category, and members of other societies often do not see the distinction between religion and culture in the same way, making it difficult to establish whether a certain custom is religious in character or part of the more general culture. This is an issue of debate not only among anthropologists studying syncretism in a given society, but also for the missionaries trying to influence the direction of contextualization. Decision as to whether a custom is part of a native religion or culture may influence whether the custom is going to be encouraged or suppressed as part of the localizing missionary religion, in this case Christianity. Father James explained to me that if a Mongolian church member approaches him with a request to include some specific tradition in, for example, a wedding ritual or infant baptism, he first studies the origin of the tradition in order to understand whether its meaning is religious or cultural and to see how it can be incorporated into the worship.²³⁹ Needless to say, what is categorized as belonging to ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ varies according to the perspective or position of the one drawing the boundaries or making the definition. Thus a native, a missionary and an anthropologist will give different answers.

The above paragraphs show that foreign missionaries still try to retain control over the direction of religious synthesis, and that indigenizing projects are still often elite attempts, imposed from top down (Shaw and Stewart, 1994:12). Such attitude has been pointed out, for example, by Kathleen Martin, who has studied the indigenous practices in the Catholic Church. She discovered that the native Catholics have limited agency. The foreign clergy is encouraged to include native traditions and practices in the local churches. For instance, church buildings are

237 Interview with father James, 18.05.2009.

238 UCAN (2007) “Missioners Recognize the Need for Caution in Inculturation Efforts,” available at http://www.ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/2007/09/26/missioners-recognize-the-need-for-caution-in-inculturation-efforts&post_id=28684, as accessed 05.05.2011.

239 Interview with Father James, 18.05.2009.

built in line with traditional structures, and indigenous objects and images are used and employed as decoration (2010: 11-12). In line with this strategy, the Catholic Cathedral in Ulaanbaatar has been built in the shape of *ger*;²⁴⁰ while the statue of Mary, Mother of Jesus, has a visibly Asian appearance in the Good Shepherd's church (photography). Father Ronald thinks that Mary can be a good role model for Mongolian women and the Asian features in the statue may help women relate to her.²⁴¹ Thus the inculturation comes from adoptions encouraged by the foreign Church representatives, and not from collaboration in defining the practices (Martin, 2010: 17).²⁴² This is not only true for the Catholic Church. Similarly, in the Russian Orthodox Church in Ulaanbaatar, the Mongolian square script²⁴³ was incorporated in the ceiling decorations.²⁴⁴



At the same time, Christianity has changed significantly in the twentieth century. While in the past the young churches had no autonomy and were regarded as subordinate and inferior (Bosch, 1991: 290), the non-Western churches no longer politely and quietly accept the authority of the missionaries and demand to be treated as equal partners. In Mongolia there is an ongoing power struggle and agency discourse between the foreign missionaries and the national church leadership. Both sides claim to have the authority to decide the shaping of the Mongolian version of Christianity. Mongolian church leaders such as Purevdorj, Bold and Dashdendev think that the decisions about the character of Mongolian Christianity should be in the hands of Mongolians, while many of the foreign missionaries think that Mongolian Christianity is not mature enough to leave the power to Mongolians and that more training and time are necessary.

Pastor Purevdorj accuses the American and Korean missionaries for being narrow-minded and for not understanding Mongolian culture and society. He thinks that Mongolians should be allowed to make decisions about what he calls 'Mongolian Christianity', and that

²⁴⁰ See photography in chapter four, page 85.

²⁴¹ Interview with Father Ronald, 16.05.2009.

²⁴² In Mongolian Catholic Church final decisions about which practices can be adopted or adapted are made by the bishop Wenceslao Padilla (interview with Father Wiktor, 19.05.2009).

²⁴³ Script created during Qubilai Khan's reign, by Tibetan monk Phags-pa, for the nations ruled by the Yuan dynasty. It was abandoned after the fall of Yuan dynasty.

²⁴⁴ Interview with Father Aleksey, 14.05.2009.

people should not be forced to give up certain traditions they grew up with just because foreigners render them “syncretic.”²⁴⁵ Furthermore, it seems that in Mongolia it is not only the foreign missionaries who have problems deciding whether certain traditions belong to the religious or the more general cultural sphere. According to Purevdorj religion and culture are so closely related that it is often difficult to distinguish between the two, but Christians should be allowed to adopt and adapt Mongolian traditions. The customs can become Christian as long as the leaders explain them properly, he maintains.²⁴⁶ Pastor Bold from the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, however, stresses the difficulties in distinguishing which customs are genuinely Mongolian and which have been imported from Tibet. Although he thinks preserving Mongolian culture is important, he admits that sometimes it is difficult to see what is authentically Mongolian. At the same time, he points out that the communist regime has destroyed or forbidden a lot of religious customs and substituted them with secular equivalents. For example the wedding ceremony has been moved to a Wedding Palace, and the Mongolian traditional wedding has been substituted with a Soviet-style ceremony where the couple receives a certificate and then the family goes to a restaurant for reception.²⁴⁷ This is the norm for many young urban Mongolians, although there is not much Mongolian about it. According to Bold adapting or rejecting any part of foreign or native culture should be an individual decision, and outsiders should not try to control people.²⁴⁸

Given time, religions will accommodate to local conditions and contextualize naturally, but worried about the threat of the distortion of the message through unwanted syncretism, the missionaries try to influence the direction of localization. Transposition is one of the tools used to achieve that. Following van der Leeuw, transposition can be defined as “the variation of the significance of any phenomenon, occurring in the dynamic of religions, while its form remains quite unaltered.” (2005: 99). While transpositions appear at all times, they are most popular during missions (ibid: 100). It is my observation that transposition is often consciously employed in Mongolia, by both missionaries and national church leaders, in the attempt to steer contextualization. For instance, the earlier mentioned example of projecting the Christian God onto the pre-Buddhist Everlasting Heaven is also an example of transposition.

245 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009.

246 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009.

247 For changes in wedding customs among Buddhists in Sri Lanka influenced by Protestant Christianity, see Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988: 255-273).

248 Interview with Pastor Bold, 02.06.2009.

Transposition is a common practice in the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II. Union of Catholic Asian News reports that the Catholic missionaries tell stories of how Mongolians would place Buddhist images and pieces of paper with sutras in the coffin during the funeral, so they replaced them with a crucifix and a rosary (since people feel it is important to put something in the coffin).²⁴⁹ The missionaries pick an already existing custom and incorporate it into Christianity, in the same or similar form, but with a changed meaning. A similar process occurred when the majority of Mongols were converted to Tibetan Buddhism in the sixteenth century, the Buddhists, lead by Tibetan missionaries, assimilated local practices and replaced the old symbols with new ones of the same function.

For example, Father James told me a story from a summer camp with young people some years back. During a hike they encountered an *ovoo*²⁵⁰ on top of a mountain. The conviction, that one needs to circumambulate it three times and add a stone on top to appease the spirits, was very strong, even among the baptized young people on the trip. Father James felt that the belief was so deeply natural to them, that it would be wrong to forbid it, instead he decided to connect it to the Bible, explaining how the prophets often went to the highest mountains to speak to god, because this is the place where one is closest to God. Afterwards they walked around the *ovoo* three times: one time for the Father, one time for the Son, and one time for the Holy Ghost. The Catholic missionaries believe that in the young Mongolian church, keeping an existing ritual and just changing its meaning is often a better solution than forbidding it, which could alienate people.²⁵¹ Father Wiktor calls transposition a necessity and refers to such practices as “baptizing” of Mongolian traditions and points out that similar process took place in Europe, where many pre-Christian customs were incorporated into Christianity to the point where today we do not even often know the origin of most of them and consider them thoroughly Christian.²⁵²

According to Father Ronald from the Good Shepherd’s parish, the best way to reach people is to stress the similarities between their native tradition and Christianity. Therefore, he points out to people the parallels between the conditions during the time of Jesus and those of the Mongolian steppe. Father Ronald noticed that Mongolians easily relate to many Bible stories,

249 UCAN (2007)

250 An *ovoo* is a devotional stone cairn. *Ovoo* worship is connected to beliefs in supernatural beings and spirits inhabiting certain parts of landscape, such as mountains, and therefore, *ovoos* are often set up in high places or on mountains. The custom is to circle an *ovoo* three times in clockwise direction, and add a stone or a piece of wood to the pile. *Ovoo* worship was forbidden during communism but has revived after democratization.

251 Interview with Father James, 18.05.2009.

252 Interview with Father Wiktor, 19.05.2009.

and that the parables using for example sheep as examples are often easier to understand for nomadic Mongolians than for urban Europeans. He also utilizes Mongolian proverbs and the similarities between Buddhism and Christianity to help communicate certain topics. For instance Father Ronald compares Buddhism as the Religion of the Path to Jesus' saying: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14: 6).²⁵³

Transposition is not only utilized by foreign missionaries, but also by Mongolian pastors, who are trying to incorporate some of the customs they grew up with into their expression of Christianity. However, while Catholics speak about dialogue and underline similarities between Buddhism and Christianity, Mongolian Protestant leaders emphasize the differences between what they understand as 'religion' and what they label as 'culture'. Evangelical Pastor Purevdorj and Seventh-Day Adventist Pastor Bold, both stressed that the traditions they employ in funeral or wedding ceremonies are part of Mongolian culture, and not Buddhism or Shamanism. Their examples include the symbolism of the ceremonial scarf (Mong. *khadag*),²⁵⁴ milk offering and fire. These examples show the fluid boundaries between what is perceived as belonging to the realms of culture and religion. According to Purevdorj *khadag* is a typically Mongolian tradition, and it is not specifically Buddhist. Furthermore he says that since Buddhists print religious symbols on the scarf, the Christians can print for example the cross. He admits that the extensive use of symbols in the Catholic Church makes it easier for them to adapt certain traditions.²⁵⁵

Both pastors admit that the Soviet-style secular wedding is easy to adapt to Christianity, and the church ceremony is very similar to the one in the Wedding Palace. However, they try to employ traditional elements by giving them a Christian meaning. Pastor Bold utilizes the Mongolian tradition of starting a small fire together by a couple during the wedding ceremony. According to Bold this symbolizes the unity of the couple, as the fire is never supposed to die, and therefore it is easily transferable to Christianity and can teach a valuable lesson about morals and staying together.²⁵⁶ In Pastor Purevdorj's church, after the couple exchanges rings, they offer *khadag* and milk. According to Purevdorj the milk offering is an old pre-Buddhist tradition, which was accepted into Buddhism and now he wishes to adapt it to Christianity.²⁵⁷

253 Interview with Father Ronald, 16.05.2009.

254 In societies where Tibetan Buddhism is practiced, one of the most common expressions of worship is the ceremonial silk scarf. In Tibet it is most commonly white, while in Mongolia the common color is blue.

255 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009.

256 Interview with Pastor Bold, 02.06.2009.

257 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009. Interestingly these ideas (of both Catholic priests and Mongolian pastors) are exactly opposite to the approach of South African evangelical pastor, Rob Forbes, who told me that

Translation of Christian terminology and the Bible into Mongolian

Finding the equivalents for Christian terms in the local language is an important part of the missionary work in a new country. It is not necessarily a straightforward process as the cultural context of the chosen words may flavor the message. The discussion surrounding Bible translation²⁵⁸ in Mongolia illustrates many of the issues presented above. The disagreements about the Mongolian word for ‘God’ demonstrate the tension between what is perceived as “authentic” contextualization and “negative” synthesis. It is also a matter where both foreign missionaries and Mongolian Christian leaders claim to have authority and therefore the right to decide. The decision is either a transposition of an existing term, which is suspected to be carrying certain cultural baggage, and a descriptive term, which may sound unfamiliar and therefore discourage people.

The first modern Mongolian New Testament (Шинэ Гэрээ) was translated by John Gibbens (I will call it the John Gibbens version, JGV) and published by the Bible Society of Mongolia,²⁵⁹ with the blessing from the United Bible Societies (UBS)²⁶⁰ in 1990. John Gibbens had been working on it since the 1970s, and he never expected Mongolia to become democratic. He was therefore writing with a “closed country” in mind. Therefore his New Testament is more a commentary than a direct translation, and it was meant to be self-explanatory and understood without any additional instruction (Leatherwood, 2006: 113).²⁶¹

At first all missionaries in Mongolia used the JGV, but quickly they felt a need for a more direct translation. In late 1993 a group of missionaries, led by Rick Leatherwood, decided to start working on a new translation. In 1994 the Mongolian Bible Translation Committee (MBTC)²⁶² was formed. In May 1995 the first two books: John and Mark were ready. In the course of translating the scriptures the MBTC hosted five open meetings with the Christian community,

many Mongolians, especially young are attracted to Christianity because it is so different from Buddhism. In his missionary work, he concentrates on the differences between Buddhism and Christianity. Moreover, he does not accept the idea of integrating Mongolian elements into Christianity. Instead, he teaches Mongolians to avoid even the Christian rituals, because they could remind them of Buddhism, which he calls “highly ritualistic religion”

(interview, 31.05.2009).

258 Besides the three translations I refer to below, there is also a translation done by Korean missionaries, as well as one by Japanese missionary, Akahita Titamura, they both use *Burkhan* for God (interview with Pastor Dashdendev, 29.05.2009). Furthermore, FirstBible International, an American Baptist Organization, is working on a translation according to their website http://www.firstbible.net/fbi_mongolia.php, as accessed 02.05.2011.

259 See <http://biblesocietymongolia.org>, (accessed 04.05.2011) for the history, translation philosophy and other publications of the Bible Society of Mongolia.

260 UBS is no longer supporting this translation.

261 Interview with Dennis Carrell, 29.05.2009.

262 The name was changed to Mongolian United Bible Society later on.

discussing the various issues surrounding the translation and the terminology (Leatherwood, 2006: 118). Many different denominations took part, including the Catholic Church and numerous evangelical groups.²⁶³ In November 1996 the New Testament in Mongolian translation was published and according to Leatherwood after six months most churches were using it (ibid: 151-152). In 2000 the full Holy Bible (Ариун Библи) was published. In 2006 revision project was commenced and the text was being carefully checked against the Greek and Hebrew versions for accuracy, consistency and style. The plan was to be finished in the end of 2010.²⁶⁴

One of the reasons for making the new Bible translation was the terminology used in JGV. John Gibbens decided to use descriptive phrases for terms such as ‘God’, ‘sin’, ‘prayer’ etc., instead of the terms available in Mongolian language, in fear that the existing terms carried too much Buddhist meaning and would distort the message of the Bible. The MBTC translation, on the contrary, used the existing Mongolian terms with the intention of making Christianity more accessible to people.²⁶⁵ Heated discussion followed, and the conflict has not yet been settled. Currently an overwhelming majority of Christian churches in Mongolia uses the MBTC translation,²⁶⁶ but a small group led by John Gibbens and Tom Terry, director of the Christian TV station, Eagle TV, agitate in favor JGV’s terminology.²⁶⁷

Especially problematic was the term for ‘God’.²⁶⁸ What some groups considered acceptable and necessary, others deemed as distortion of the “true” message. John Gibbens, in his translation, used *Yertöntsiin Ezen* (Ертөнцийн Эзэн, Mong. ‘Lord of the Universe’). According to Gibbens,²⁶⁹ in this way Christians are declaring that their God is unique and

263 Interview with Markus Dubach, 27.05.2009

264 Interview with Pastor Dashdendev, 29.05.2009

265 For example, an American missionary, Brian Hogan, who worked in Mongolia in the nineties, sees the use of the invented, descriptive terms in the early nineties as the main reason why in the first years almost all of the converts to Christianity were teenage girls, and claims that after switching to traditional terminology it was easier to reach more traditional, older people (<http://www.cpcaches.com/resources/amazing-stories/khan-of-khans>, as accessed 07.05.2009)

266 Pastor Purevdorj estimates that maybe five churches use the JGV, (interview, 25.05.2011)

267 These missionaries, mostly American, are quite active on the internet and there is a number of websites where they present their arguments, for example <http://www.jbhenry.com/jb/Terminology.html>, and <http://churchpuritymongolia.com>, as accessed 05.04.2011.

268 In this section it is important to remember that Bible distinguishes between God (capital letter, the Christian monotheistic creator God), and gods (lower case) for example in Genesis (3:5) Satan says to Eve: “For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil”. Finding Mongolian term, which would cover both of these meanings, has been one of the problems. Since this section concentrates on the point of view of the different missionaries, I apply the distinction throughout, also for the Mongolian terms.

269 I contacted John Gibbens, but he replied that he does not give any interviews anymore. Rob Forbes thinks Gibbens has become very careful after he criticized Buddhism on his blog, which caused storm in the Mongolian media (interview, 31.05.2009). Therefore, his side of the feud is presented based on internet sources

separate from any other god.²⁷⁰ However, most Christians use the term *Burkhan* (Бурхан) for ‘God’. This term was applied in the MBTC translation. In the 1997 *Mongolian-English Dictionary* compiled by Charles Bawden, the listed meanings of *Burkhan* include ‘Buddha’, ‘Buddha statue’ and ‘God’, with *Burkhny Shashin* (Бурхны Шашин) meaning ‘Buddhism’. In the 2008 *English-Mongolian, Mongolian-English Dictionary*, *Burkhan* is listed as ‘Buddha’, ‘deity’, and ‘God’, and *Burkhan Shashin* (Бурхан Шашин) as ‘Buddhism’. According to Walther Heissig *Burkhan* in the meaning ‘Buddha’ was used already in fourth century CE (1980: 4). Larry Moses notes that Uighurs used *Burkhan* for ‘Buddha’ in the seventh century and that the word is Chinese in origin (1977: 31). However, Pastor Purevdorj maintains that *Burkhan* was originally used in pre-Buddhist context, and only later adapted by Buddhism, and therefore is the correct generic Mongolian word for ‘God’.²⁷¹

The advocates of *Yertöntsiin Ezen* disagree with the claim that *Burkhan* has a neutral meaning and criticize it for being too much associated with Buddhism, which they fear can lead to syncretism (in the negative, missionary understanding of the term). They argue that the use of *Burkhan* makes it easy for Mongolians to accept the Christian God as just one more of gods that can be addressed in need, which is seen as a heresy in monotheistic Christianity.²⁷² According to John Gibbens, only a handful of Mongolian Christians are “truly” Christians, the rest does neither know nor understand Christianity nor God. They just say they go to church and it makes them happy.²⁷³

Supported by the majority of foreign missionaries, the Mongolian Christian leaders feel it is better to take a familiar, indigenous term and to try to transform its meaning, rather than to create a new phrase. They argue that the context of the Bible makes it clear that the meaning is different from the Buddhist one. According to Pastor Purevdorj, the common use of *Burkhan* is in relation to Buddhism only because there was no other religion in Mongolia that could use it, but its meaning is transferable in the same way that the English word ‘god’ is used by many religions. *Yertöntsiin Ezen* is more a personal name and not a generic word and therefore does not cover the “lower case” god. Pastor Purevdorj explains that the Mongolian language has many

and other people’s opinions.

270 Gibbens (2007)

271 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009.

272 Suchy (2005) “Our Position and Perspective on a Critical Controversy”, available at http://www.jbhenry.com/jb/Terminology_files/critical%20controversy.pdf, as accessed 05.05.2011.

273 Gibbens (2007)

words for the invisible and heavenly powers, but not many words for ‘God’. If they were to find a word to substitute *Burkhan* it would not be a composed word like *Yestöntsiin Ezen*, but another traditional word, like *Tenger* (Тэнгэр, Mong. ‘Heaven’), still used for ‘God’ in Inner Mongolia.²⁷⁴ The modern word *Tenger* derives from old Mongolian *Tenggeri*, used for ‘God’, as in *Möngke Tenggeri*, the ‘Eternal Heaven’ Chinggis Khan prayed to (Atwood, 2004: 532).

According to Pastor Rob Forbes, who has worked in Mongolia since 1995, *Yestöntsiin Ezen* is not a neutral, artificially created term and the understanding of it is different in the city and in parts of the countryside. He says that when he traveled to northern Mongolia, people there recognized *Yestöntsiin Ezen* and connected it to pre-Buddhist cosmology. Forbes stresses that there is no word in Mongolian that would describe ‘God’ adequately (he sees similar problem with many words such as ‘sin,’ ‘salvation’ and ‘righteousness’), and all words have preconceived meanings, thus the importance should be placed on teaching what the Christian understanding of the terms is.²⁷⁵ Pastor Ganbat agrees education is the key. He says that he knows about the other meanings of the term *Burkhan*, but he understands the difference. Moreover, according to Ganbat thinks *Yestöntsiin Ezen* - ‘Lord of the Universe’ is a problematic term, because ‘Lord’ has wrong connotations, because it suggests a ruler, who people are supposed to serve. At the same time, he thinks having several translations of the Bible is a good thing, because people can compare the different versions and better understand Christianity.²⁷⁶

Pastor Purevdorj emphasizes that the problem is created by foreigners and stresses that not many Mongolian Christians are educated in theology and therefore they tend to repeat what the missionaries say. He doubts that any Mongolian would think of or suggest changing the terminology, and believes that the initiative always comes from foreign missionaries. Purevdorj wishes that the missionaries would let Mongolians make decisions about their own language: “teach the concept and let us decide the word,” he said.²⁷⁷ Markus Dubach, who has been in Mongolia since the early nineties and has therefore witnessed the dispute from the beginning, thinks that Mongolian church leaders have come to the point where they want to decide about the shape of Christianity in Mongolia, but the foreigners still think it is their obligation. The history of denominational differences plays an important part in the problem. Mongolian leaders are able

274 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009.

275 Interview with Rob Forbes, 31.05.2009.

276 Interview with Pastor Ganbat, 22.05.2009.

277 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009

to work together, but the foreign missionaries increasingly speak of making their own translations and using their own vocabulary.²⁷⁸

The Catholic priests cooperated with the other denominations on the MBTC translation, but at some point started to doubt the use of *Burkhan*. Father James explains that when he speaks about *Burkhan*, people repeatedly ask him “what kind of *Burkhan*” and therefore the word does not express the uniqueness of the monotheistic creator God in Christianity. The Catholic Church introduced the term *Tengerburkhan* (Тэнгэрбурхан), meaning ‘Heavenly God’ or ‘God of Heaven’. The Catholic missionaries realize that the word *Burkhan* is not perfect, but they as long as they do not have any good alternative, they use it. In the meanwhile they accept that the transposition of meaning is a long process and hope that with time people will understand “the essence” and the difference.²⁷⁹

A group of American Baptist missionaries from the Rich Heart Baptist Church in Ulaanbaatar has decided to make their own translation of the Bible, based on the *Authorized King James Version*. They began working in 2008. According to Dennis Carrell, who initiated the translation project, the existing Mongolian translations of Christian terms do not cover all the meanings of the concept of ‘God’ in the Bible. While *Yertöntsiin Ezen* is more like a personal name, and is meant to cover the “capital letter” ‘God’, it is not sufficient to express the “lower case” ‘god’. At the same time Carrell maintains that *Burkhan* is a Buddhist word and confuses people.²⁸⁰ During my fieldwork in 2009, they had decided to use *Deed Shüteen* (Дээд Шүтээн), which they translated as ‘the Highest Worshipped’.²⁸¹ The missionaries felt the word covered well all meanings of the word ‘god’, since the highest worshipped thing could be anything, but it also could refer to the Highest Worshipped Christian God.²⁸² However, they stressed that it was not necessarily their final choice and they were open for changes.²⁸³ As of May 2011, in the Mongolian translation of the four gospels available online, they use just *Shüteen* (Шүтээн).²⁸⁴ Pastor Purevdorj admits that if the translation is good, he is willing to use it when it is ready.²⁸⁵

278 Interview with Markus Dubach, 27.05.2009

279 Interview with Father James, 18.05.2009.

280 Interview with Dennis Carrell, 29.05.2009.

281 The foreign missionaries translated the term as the Highest Worshipped, but the Mongolian translators said it meant Supreme or High Idol.

282 Interview with Dennis Carrell, 29.05.2009 and Bill Cooper, 11.05.2009.

283 The Mongolian translation team was in passionate disagreement about the terminology when I met with them.

284 The Mongolian translation of the four gospels is available at the Rich Heart Baptists’ website www.mongoliateam.com, as accessed 03.05.2011.

285 Interview with Pastor Purevdorj, 25.05.2009.

Concluding remarks

The multiplicity of Bible translation in a church that has only existed for twenty years shows that the contextualization of Christianity in Mongolia is not a straightforward process where the converts simply incorporate their new beliefs into their lives and make them their own. Instead, it is interplay of often conflicting and opposing forces, where natural syncretistic tendencies are suppressed by anti-syncretistic protectionism of the “true” message, and where the foreigners and the locals clash in the struggle for power and agency. Removed from the theoretical discussions between the foreign missionaries and national church leaders, we find the people, who are trying to find their individual expression of the religion that came recently from the West, but which first made its presence felt at the court during the reign of the Mongol Khans, and which was influential in the Mongol Empire. As Thomas Tweed points out, for those who choose their new faith, the old tradition never disappears completely, and therefore surely affects the worldview and practice of the convert (Tweed, 2002: 19). Furthermore, religious syntheses do not always arise from intentional innovations. Attempts to create meaning do not always succeed, in fact, they may have unintended consequences (Shaw and Stewart, 1994: 19). In the case of Mongolia, modern Christianity is so young there, that we will have to wait to see how the translation of meanings influences the message, and how this world religion becomes local in the country.

Conclusion

The twentieth century was a time of transition for Mongolia. Within the hundred years period the country experienced Manchu domination, short-lived independence under theocratic rule, struggle for power between China and Russia, communism and being a Soviet satellite, and finally democracy with all the consequences of a free economic market and open borders. Probably not many countries can claim to have had an equally turbulent past. This period is also characterized by tremendous changes in religious life. Mongolia entered the twentieth century as an extremely religious country, with Buddhism dominating most aspects of both monastic and lay life, and including also fields such as medicine and politics. Rule of religion was ended abruptly in the 1930s with the bloody purges of the communist regime, and for most of the century Mongolia lived under the veil of state dictated atheism, until the peaceful revolution and introduction of democracy.

The end of communism meant the end of Marxist atheism as the official ideology, the end of censorship, state control, and antireligious propaganda. It meant not only freedom to believe, but – perhaps even more significantly – freedom to express one's beliefs. Mongolians cast off all restraints on religious practice and stormed to the few Buddhist monasteries and temples still standing, to the *ovoos* and sacred mountains. Hidden sacred objects were dug out and displayed in home altars. However, the new freedom of religion meant not only the freedom to openly practice the religion of their ancestors, but also the freedom to choose religion from the infinite pool of options in the modern pluralist religious market. Among the different faiths, religious organizations, churches and denominations that began to penetrate Mongolia in order to seek new converts the most prominent were the Christian missionaries. The International Religious Freedom Report from 2010 estimated that there might be over 100,000 Mongolian Christians. The churches own statistics in 2009 were more modest, claiming half of that number.

As Christian missionaries introduce their religious ideas to Mongolians they act as catalysts for change and fusion. Therefore, the idea behind this thesis was to study religious beliefs and practices, not as static entities with fixed and rigid characteristics, but as an ever changing system in a perpetual motion. In order to achieve that, I employed the notion of multiple modernities and examined secularization as a multidimensional concept. Furthermore, I concentrated on the dynamics of localization of Christianity in Mongolia, in particular the

interplay between the Mongolian context, external influences and local adaptations as Christian missionaries are trying to gain a foothold in this predominantly Buddhist country.

To conclude the discussion I would like to return to the assessment by Gertrude Dubach, that Christianity in Mongolia has entered a “consolidation stage.” I believe that she offers a very accurate description of what is happening in Mongolia. As the growth has stagnated, Mongolian Christians have begun the journey to establishing their place on the Mongolian spiritual map within the context of a modern democracy. At the same time they have begun the process of building a indigenous expression of Christianity. Therefore, big part of this study has revolved around the question of identity: identity as a Mongolian, identity as a Christian, and identity as a citizen of a modern democratic country and whether these different identities are reconcilable.

The concept of multiple modernities allows for more than one process to be taking place at the same time in the Mongolian society, as the Christian missionaries adapt to the changing world. In order to work it seems that Christianity needs to be externally linked and at the same time firmly locally grounded; features which appear at first to be mutually exclusive but on closer inspection turn out to be mutually supportive. On the one hand, the external link is the association of the aura of modernity and prosperity with Christianity. On the other hand, is the localizing combination of Christianity with the archaic layer of Mongolian pre-Buddhist beliefs and the association of contemporary Christianity with the Nestorian Christians in the Mongol Empire. But when traditions interact, in a reality of globalization and competition between religions, all parts can change in the process. Perhaps then, it is possible that the activities of the Christian missionaries are encouraging Buddhists to reinvent their tradition to fit the modern conditions of pluralist competition? It seems that while Christians are discussing contextualization, some of the Buddhists are considering a degree of Westernization.

One thing is certain, the enthusiastic teenagers, who accepted Christianity in the nineties, have grown up, and turned into outspoken leaders of Mongolian Christianity, and it is up to them (even if the foreign missionaries sometimes object) to decide the course, as this global religion becomes Mongolian and again tries to take root on the steppe.

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Abstract

A pervasive image of Mongolia found in Western popular culture is of a wide steppe untouched by civilization and people living simple pastoral life in a way they have been doing for centuries, but Mongolia is a country of enormous contrasts. Life in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, where close to half of the population resides, is as far from the image of the steppe as one can go. Mongolia underwent tremendous social and cultural transformations in the last two decades. The purpose of this thesis is to tell the story of Christianity in Mongolia after 1990 and to provide framework for understanding it.

What we are witnessing in contemporary Mongolia is a third wave of missionary efforts of Western Christianity to “conquer the steppe”. The previous attempts, the Catholic envoys to the Great Khans in the Mongol Empire and the missionaries in the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century failed. The steppes of Outer Mongolia turned out to be hostile and inaccessible, the nomadic settlements were not permanent and sparse and the work brought few converts. The only successful Christian missionaries in the Mongol lands were the Syriac-rite Nestorians, deemed as heretics by Western Christianity, who managed to gain significant influence among some of the Mongol tribes.

The third wave of Christian missionary efforts to Mongolia began after Mongolians cast off the restraints of communism and embraced democracy in 1990. After seventy years of socialist atheism, freedom of religion and belief was introduced. However, the new freedom of religion meant not only the freedom to openly practice the religion of their ancestors, but also the freedom to choose religion from the infinite pool of options in the modern pluralist religious market. Different faiths, religious organizations, churches and denominations began to penetrate Mongolia in order to seek new converts. Among them the most prominent were the Christian missionaries. My study focuses on how the Christian missionaries maneuver the legal, social, political and religious landscape of rapidly changing Mongolia and explores how they deal with its possibilities and limitations in the attempt to propagate their beliefs. Furthermore, the thesis attempts to provide the reader with tools for understanding of the interplay between the external influences and local adaptations as Christianity is trying to gain a foothold in this predominantly Buddhist country.

The thesis is largely based on a fieldwork conducted in Mongolia in spring of 2009.